NATION

Police arrest 10 after communal clashes in Bihar

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Tesla starts hiring in India; signals entering EV market

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CT starts today amid 50-over debate

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈھ روزنامہ بنگلور

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Unemployment rate dips to 6.45 in December: Survey

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The rate of unemployment among people aged 15 years and above in urban areas dropped marginally to 6.4 per cent in the October-December quarter of the current fiscal, according to the National Sample Survey Survey (NSSO). Joblessness, or unemployment rate, is defined as the percentage of unemployed people in the labour force. The unemployment rate in the December quarter of FY24 was 6.5 per cent. However, the rate stayed flat when compared sequentially. In the preceding July-September quarter of FY25, the rate of unemployment for people aged 15 years and above in urban areas was at the same level of 6.4 per cent, the 25th Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) showed. The unemployment rate among females (aged 15 years and above) in urban areas declined to 8.1 per cent in October-December 2024 from 8.6 per cent in the same quarter a year ago. The rate was 8.4 per cent in July-September, 2024. *—PTI*

NIA nabs 2 Karwar naval base workers for spying for Pak

UTTARA KANNADA, 18 FEB

The National Ingestion Agency (NIA) on Tuesday took into custody two contract workers of the high security Seabird Naval Base in Karwar taluk of the district, for alleged spying. Uttara Kannada Superintendent of Police Narayan M said the NIA has taken two staffers into custody and interrogated them in Karwar city police station. "The duo allegedly passed a few photographs of the highly secured prohibited zone to others," he said. Salar News sources also confirmed that the NIA team that arrived Karwar on Monday has taken Akshay Naik from Ankola taluk and Vetan Tandel from Karwar taluk on charges of sending a few campus photographs of base to a woman working as a spy for Pakistan. The entire naval base is a prohibited area where outsiders are not and no staff can take a photo or video footage.Sources in police said that the duo taken into custody was victim of honey trap by the woman and sent the photographs in 2024. The NIA, according to police, took the two persons in to custody after tracking details about the woman. Three more staff members of the naval base were interrogated in Karwar city police station on Monday in connection with the development. The two people taken in to custody were subjected to a medical test at a government hospital in Karwar before taking them to Delhi. *—Salar News*

Midnight CEC appointment by PM disrespectful: RaGa

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday said it is "disrespectful" and "discourteous" for the prime minister and home minister to have made a midnight decision to select the new CEC when the process of selection is being challenged in the Supreme Court. The government late on Monday night appointed Gyanesh Kumar as the new Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), hours after the meeting of the prime minister-led selection committee in which the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha asked the government to defer the meeting in view of the Supreme Court hearing in the matter. *—PTI*

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Issue B-Khata to properties in illegal layouts, says CM

CM sets 3-month deadline for this one-time settlement

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has directed Karnataka officials to end the issue of illegal residential layouts across the State by granting a one-time B-Khata settlement. This initiative aims to regularise unapproved properties, providing much-needed relief to lakhs of property owners and generating significant revenue for the government. Siddaramaiah set a three-month deadline for completing the process.

In Karnataka, properties built on authorised layouts approved by authorities such as the Bengaluru Development Authority (BDA) receive A-Khata, while unapproved layouts are assigned B-Khata, marking them as illegal. The chief minister's directive seeks to resolve this long-standing issue by offering a one-time settlement that would apply statewide.

During a video conference with Urban Development Department officials and Deputy Commissioners, Siddaramaiah stated that the government aims to eliminate illegal layouts once and for all. "This is a one-time measure, and the task should be completed within three months. We need to end unauthorised settlements through the law," he said, emphasising that no new illegal settlements would be allowed in the state.

Siddaramaiah stated that the government aims to eliminate illegal layouts once and for all *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

Siddaramaiah noted that unauthorised layouts not only resulted in lost revenue for the state but also left residents without essential civic amenities. He warned officials that any future illegal settlements would be met with strict accountability. "If unauthorised settlements arise again, district officials and urban planning officers will be held responsible," he added.

The chief minister also urged officials to remove intermediaries and brokers, stating that the government's intention is to provide a solution for the poor and middle class. "We will begin the B-Khata process immediately," Siddaramaiah confirmed.

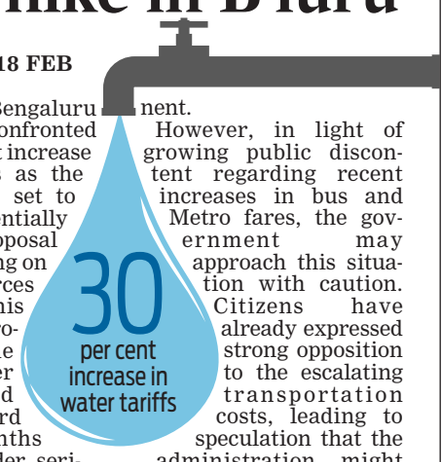
Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda and Forest Minister Eshwar Khandre, along with senior officials, attended the meeting. Siddaramaiah explained that a committee, led by Khandre, had formulated a law to tackle illegal layouts, which would now be enforced in Bengaluru and, later, across the State. *—PTI*

CABINET DECISION SOON

Water bills to go up as govt mulls 30% tariff hike in B'luru

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Residents of Bengaluru may soon be confronted with a 30 per cent increase in water tariffs as the state cabinet is set to discuss and potentially finalise the proposal during its meeting on Thursday. Sources indicate that this hike, initially proposed by the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) months ago, is now under serious consideration and could receive government approval ahead of the budget session.



The BWSSB earlier recommended the tariff revision, attributing it to rising operational costs. Following extensive deliberation in official meetings, a final decision from the cabinet appears imminent.

However, in light of growing public discontent regarding recent increases in bus and Metro fares, the government may approach this situation with caution. Citizens have already expressed strong opposition to the escalating transportation costs, leading to speculation that the administration might delay or reconsider the water tariff hike to mitigate further backlash.

Officials suggest that the government could adopt a 'wait and watch' strategy before implementing any tariff revisions.

A conclusive decision is anticipated following Thursday's cabinet meeting. *—Salar News*

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi on Tuesday *PHOTO: PTI*

India, Qatar to double trade to $28B in 5 yrs

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

India and Qatar have embarked on a new chapter in bilateral relations, aiming to double their trade volume to USD 28 billion over the next five years. This announcement came during talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani in New Delhi, where both leaders agreed to elevate their relationship to the status of a strategic partnership.

In addition to the trade commitment, two agreements were signed: one establishing the strategic partnership and another revising the existing Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement. Five memoranda of understanding were also exchanged to enhance cooperation in areas such as economic partnership, archive management, youth affairs, and sports.

Arun Kumar Chatterjee, Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, noted that the partnership would deepen cooperation in trade, energy security, and on various regional and international platforms.

Last year, during Modi's visit to Qatar, a landmark USD 78 billion deal for liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports was signed, securing a 20-year extension.

The Amir's visit, his second state trip to India, included a ceremonial guard of honour and a warm welcome by Modi at the airport, reinforcing the friendly ties between the two nations.

The discussions are expected to bolster the countries' ongoing collaboration across trade, investment, technology, and cultural exchanges, strengthening their historical ties of friendship and trust. *—PTI*

RANVEER'S JOKE FIASCO

SC asks Centre to consider regulating 'obscene content'

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Supreme Court on Tuesday asked the Centre to consider regulating obscene content on YouTube and other social media and said it would not leave a vacuum and barren area the way it is being misused by so-called YouTube channels.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kotiswar Singh asked Additional Solicitor General Aishwarya Bhati, who was sitting in the courtroom on another matter, to ask the Attorney General and Solicitor General for assistance in the court.

"There was this case of so-called YouTubers... We would like you (the government) to do something. If the government is willing to do something, we are happy; otherwise, we will not leave this vacuum and barren area the way so-called YouTube channels are misusing it and all these things are going on..," Justice Kant told Bhati.

The bench said, "We should not overlook the importance and sensitivity of the issue."

Justice Kant told Bhati, "Please request the Attorney General and the Solicitor General to be here on the next date of hearing."The top court's remarks came in the wake of inappropriate comments by YouTuber and Podcaster Ranveer Allahabadia during his guest appearance on the show India's Got Latent. *—ANI*

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The words you have used will make daughters, sisters, parents and even the society feel ashamed. It shows a perverted mind. If this is not obscenity, what is it?

—SC TO RANVEER ALLAHBADIA

FILE FIR AGAINST CRIMES, NOT JOKES: COMEDIANS RUE

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

As the Supreme Court weighed in on YouTuber Ranveer Allahbadia's joke on 'India's Got Latent', standup comedians and comedy reel makers say the controversy has been dragged too far.

They questioned the speed with which multiple FIRs were filed against Ranveer, pointing out that no such urgency was shown in response to New Delhi's Railway Station stampede, which killed 18 people on Saturday.

"There are far more serious matters in the country that need attention, like the New Delhi station stampede. The crime rate remains high, rapes continue, and people are still outraged over India's Got Latent," said comedy content creator Priyam Ghose to The Telegraph.

Subham Chaudhuri, who has been running his comedy page Bong Short since 2019, added, "There are many critical issues in our country right now. People are overreacting to this, and Ranveer is an easy. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: X

After 6 yrs, Christian Michel gets bail in AgustaWestland row

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Supreme Court of India has granted bail to Christian Michel James, an alleged middleman in the high-profile AgustaWestland scandal involving irregularities worth Rs 3,600 crores. A bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta noted that James had been in custody for over six years while the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) continues its investigation.

James's release on bail is contingent upon conditions set by the trial court, as he faces a related money laundering case, with his bail plea still pending in the Delhi High Court. The court questioned the prolonged investigation, suggesting that the trial could extend for decades without meaningful progress.

Christian Michel, a British national, was extradited from Dubai in December 2018 and arrested shortly thereafter. His previous bail requests were denied, including a recent rejection from the High Court in September 2024, which found no significant change in circumstances.

The AgustaWestland case revolves around the purchase of 12 VVIP helicopters and allegations of substantial financial loss to the Indian government. *—PTI*

'BRIDGE FOR THE REPATRIATION'

Costa Rica to accept Indian US deportees

SAN JOSÉ, 18 FEB

Costa Rica has agreed to act as a "bridge" for the repatriation of illegal immigrants from the United States, including individuals from India and Central Asia, as per an official announcement on Tuesday.

The first group of 200 migrants is scheduled to arrive at Juan Santamaria International Airport on Wednesday, according to a statement released by Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves Robles' office. "The Government of Costa Rica has agreed to collaborate with the United States in the repatriation of 200 illegal immigrants to their home countries, primarily from countries in Central Asia and India," the statement noted.

PHOTO: X

While the release did not specify the number of Indians among those deported, it indicated these migrants would be taken to a temporary migrant care facility in Costa Rica before being repatriated to their home countries.

The US-funded operation is being supervised by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which will manage the care of the migrants during their stay in Costa Rica. This development follows Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to the US, where he met with President Donald Trump to discuss various bilateral matters, including immigration.

Previously, three batches comprising a total of 332 Indians had already been repatriated to India amid a heightened crackdown on illegal immigrants by the Trump administration. *—PTI*

French surgeon goes on trail for raping 299 patients

PARIS, 18 FEB

A former surgeon goes on trial on 24 February for raping or sexually assaulting almost 299 patients, most of them children and many of them unconscious at the time, over quarter of a century across France.

Joel Le Scouarnec, 74, is already in jail after a court in 2020 found him guilty of abusing four children, including two of his nieces.

In a separate four-month trial to start on 24 February, he faces allegations that he also assaulted or raped 299 patients, most while they were under general anaesthetic at a dozen hospitals between 1989 and 2014.

In total, 256 of the 299 victims were under 15, with the youngest aged one and the oldest aged 70. Investigators only uncovered his alleged crimes after he retired in 2017, when a six-year-old girl accused him of rape and police found countless accounts of abuse in his diaries.

The trial comes at a time of reckoning around sex crimes in France after the conviction of Dominique Pelicot, who was found guilty in December of drugging his wife and inviting dozens of men over to their home to rape her. Fifty other men were also convicted of rape. *—Agencies*

Man knocked down by goods carrier vehicle in City

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

A 23-year-old man died after he was knocked down by a goods carrier vehicle near Boodigere Road while he was riding to pick his brother from the KR Puram railway station. The incident took place around 2am on Tuesday when the deceased, identified as Vijaya Kumar, was on his way to pick up his elder brother who had come from Bihar, and was waiting at the KR Puram railway station. According to the Chikkajala traffic police, an over-speeding goods carrier knocked Kumar's two-wheeler down which resulted in Kumar suffering multiple severe injuries on his body. Despite being taken to a hospital immediately, he succumbed to injuries on Tuesday morning. A case has been registered against the goods carrier vehicle owner. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: X

2 college students killed in car crash in City

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Two college students died and as many were injured after their speeding car allegedly hit a tree near Ragihalli forest area in the outskirts of the city, police said on Tuesday. Shahuk and Arshu, both aged 23, who hailed from Kollam district in Kerala died on the spot, they said. According to the police, the incident occurred at around 11.30 pm on Monday. The driver lost control of the vehicle and allegedly crashed into the tree on the roadside resulting in death of two people on the spot. Two others sustained injuries and are being treated at a hospital. A case has been registered for rash and negligent driving, police said, adding further investigation is underway to ascertain if they were under the influence of alcohol at the time of incident. *—PTI*

K'taka Bank reverses Rs 18.87 cr int'l UPI transfers

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Private sector lender Karnataka Bank has reserved suspicious cross border UPI transactions amounting to Rs 18.87 crore to its customers. The reversal was done as these transactions could not be processed. This was reflected during the reconciliation exercise with National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) undertaken by the bank. During the course of its review of suspicious UPI Global transactions has identified certain deficiencies in the reconciliation process, Karnataka Bank said in a regulatory filing on Monday evening. The bank will initiate necessary actions towards recovery of the amount involved and has also put in place additional control processes to prevent recurrence, it had said. *—PTI*

Guv summons budget session starting from 3 Mar

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot on Tuesday summoned the budget session of the Karnataka Legislature starting from 3 March. A notification was issued by the Parliamentary Affairs and Legislation Secretariat in this regard. "In exercise of the powers conferred upon me by clause (1) of Article 174 of the Constitution of India, I, Thaawarchand Gehlot, the Governor of Karnataka do hereby summon the Karnataka Legislative Assembly to meet at Bengaluru at 11.00 A.M. on Monday, the 3rd day of March, 2025," the notification read. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, who also holds the finance portfolio, said on Monday that he will present the state budget for the year 2025-26 on 7 March. This will be his 16th budget presentation. *—PTI*

CM prefers silence over 'power-sharing pact'

A rumoured power-sharing deal suggested Siddaramaiah as CM for half term, followed by DKS

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Amid a tussle between Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar and Cooperative Minister KN Rajanna over the 'power-sharing agreement', Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Tuesday said he would prefer not to speak.

It was rumoured that there was a secret power-sharing formula, according to which Siddaramaiah would be the chief minister for the first half of the Congress government's five-year term and then Shivakumar would replace him.

A section of Congress MLAs and ministers has been backing Siddaramaiah and want him to complete the five-year term.

On the other hand, Shivakumar, who is also the Congress state president, has been trying to silence his opponents within the party, asking them to refrain from any such discussions as it causes damage to the party.

Cheif Minister Siddaramaiah — *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

During an interaction with reporters on Tuesday, Siddaramaiah preferred not to speak on the issue.

"I will not speak about the controversy now. Rajanna and Shivakumar have expressed their views," he said.

When asked whether the power-sharing agreement was for real, he said, "How many times should I tell you that the high command takes the final decision? Whatever they (high command) decide will be applicable to all".

Meanwhile, Siddaramaiah said that the government is committed to implementing the caste census report.

He said people should not doubt the intention of his government. He also said that the government is in favour of the caste census. *—PTI*

- During an interaction, Siddaramaiah preferred not to speak on the issue. A section of MLAs has been backing Siddaramaiah and want him to complete the five-year term

Patil rejects speculation of half-term deal on CM post

VIJAYAPURA, 18 FEB

MB Patil — *PHOTO: PTI*

Minister of Commerce and Industries MB Patil on Tuesday said that the Congress High Command is keeping a close watch on the ongoing talk about the Chief Minister's position in the state.

Patil said, "We have a High Command in the Congress party, and it is watching everything. In all issues, the high command is supreme. Mallikarjun Kharge, Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and AICC General Secretaries are supreme," he said.

There is speculation that Chief Minister Siddaramaiah may resign, paving the way for DK Shivakumar to take over as the new Chief Minister. It is being claimed that a half-term contract was agreed upon by the two leaders.

Political Secretary to the Karnataka CM Naseer Ahmed said, "The decision regarding the Chief Minister's position within our party will be taken by the legislature party and the high command. No individual, regardless of their position, has the authority to make statements that deviate from the party line. We are all committed to upholding discipline." *—ANI*

Approve Mekedatu, release irrigation dues: DKS to Centre

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar on Tuesday urged the Centre to grant approvals for the Mekedatu project and release pending funds for various irrigation projects in the State.

He was speaking at the All India State Water Ministers' Conference 2025, themed 'India@2047–A Water-Secure Nation', held in Udaipur.

"The Union Ministry of Jal Shakti must instruct the Central Water Commission to grant approval for the Mekedatu project on a priority basis," Shivakumar, who holds Irrigation portfolio said. "This project will help Karnataka release Cauvery water to Tamil Nadu as per the specified monthly quantum. Additionally, the project will generate 400 MW of power and fulfill Bengaluru's drinking water needs," he added.

According to Shivakumar, the Centre had announced a grant of Rs 5,300 crore for the Upper Bhadra project in the 2023-24 budget, yet the amount has not been released.

"I appeal to the union government to release funds for the project as it caters to the drought-affected Central Karnataka region," he was quoted as saying in a statement, issued by the minister's office.

Noting that India currently has a water storage capacity of 253 billion cubic meters, Shivakumar said, "Our country needs to strengthen its water resource capabilities to ensure robust economic growth."

He suggested that to facilitate water security and the optimal utilisation of the country's water resources for health, food, energy, and other societal needs, several steps need to be taken. *—PTI*

Yadgir students forced to clean drain, activist seeks action

YADGIR, 18 FEB

A shocking incident has surfaced in Kyatanal village, under Kadmagera Panchayat in Vadagera Taluk, Yadgir district, where a school headmaster allegedly made students clean a filthy borewell drainage system.

Parents, who send their children to school with hopes of securing a bright future, were left outraged after a video of the incident went viral on social media. The video reportedly shows headmaster Sharanappa Bagli personally supervising and instructing students to clean the drain.

Condemning the incident, Kannada social activist TN Bhimu Nayak has demanded immediate action against the headmaster. *—Salar News*

The video reportedly shows headmaster Sharanappa Bagli personally supervising and instructing students to clean drain — *PHOTO: SALAR*

JUSTICE FOR SPORTS

Students and members of the Karnataka State Kho Kho Association protest at Freedom Park, Bengaluru, on Tuesday, demanding Rs 50 lakh for international medalists, government jobs for athletes, and other reforms from the Karnataka Olympic Association — *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

Bidar DC warns lenders defying RBI norms

BIDAR, 18 FEB

Financial institutions, moneylenders and microfinance organisations operating in the district must strictly adhere to the guidelines and regulations issued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), said Deputy Commissioner Shilpa Sharma.

She was presiding over a recent meeting at the District Commissioner's office with lead bank managers and microfinance institutions' (MFI) representatives from the district.

Before granting loans, microfinance institutions must assess the borrower's income and other financial aspects. Loans should not exceed 50 per cent of the borrower's income.

Both lenders and borrowers must maintain financial discipline, she said. As per RBI guidelines, microfinance institutions are permitted to provide loans up to Rs 3 lakh. *— Salar News*

MYSURU COUPLE DIES BY SUICIDE OVER ONLINE BETTING DEBT

Mysuru, 18 FEB

A couple allegedly died by suicide by hanging near a water tank at Vijaynagar Ground in the city on Tuesday morning due to financial distress linked to online betting, police said.

The deceased have been identified as Jobi Antony and his wife Sharmila.

The incident comes a day after Jobi's elder brother Joshi Antony died by suicide by hanging in the Mysuru South police station limits, police said.

According to the police, Jobi and Joshi were twins. Before ending his life on Monday, Joshi recorded a video alleging that his brother, Jobi, and his wife, Sharmila, had taken loans amounting to up to Rs 80 lakh for online betting.

Due to the non-repayment of the loan, the moneylenders were allegedly harassing Joshi and their sister, Mary, as Jobi and Sharmila had stayed at their place for a few months, a senior police officer said, citing preliminary investigation.

After the post-mortem, the bodies will be handed over to the family, police said, adding that further investigation is underway. *—PTI*

2 FOUND DEAD AFTER DRINKING PARTY IN CITY

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Two men were found dead under mysterious circumstances, while a third person remains in critical condition after a drinking party at their rented house in Yarandahalli.

The deceased were identified as Diwan Afrid Ali, 27, and Ashraf Ali, 34, both natives of Assam. The identity of the third person is yet to be confirmed.

The exact cause of death remains unknown so far, and the bodies have been sent for a post-mortem examination, police said.

Preliminary investigations revealed that the trio had been living together in the house and working at a factory in Electronics City for the past several months.

On Monday, they reportedly consumed alcohol at home. The incident came to light around 10pm when another friend entered the house and found all three collapsed on the floor.

"As he tried to wake them up, only one of them responded but was unable to speak due to severe stomach pain," a police officer said. "He checked the other two and was shocked to find them unresponsive.

He immediately alerted the police and called for an ambulance."

The victims were rushed to hospital, where doctors confirmed that Afrid and Ashraf had died, while their friend was in critical condition.

Police suspect that the victims may have either consumed excessive alcohol or abused drugs. "We are awaiting the post-mortem report to determine the exact cause of death," the officer added. Investigation is ongoing. *—Salar News*

9 held with country-made pistols in Vijayapura

VIJAYAPURA, 18 FEB

In a major crackdown on illegal firearms in this district, the police have arrested nine people and seized 24 live cartridges.

Briefing reporters on Tuesday, Vijayapura Superintendent of Police Laxman Nimbargi said the police intensified their investigation following the murder of Satish Prem Singh Rathod on 28 January.

On that day, Ramesh Lamani shot and killed Satish Rathod at Arikeri Tanda in the Vijayapura Rural police station limits, he said.

Six people were arrested and remanded to judicial custody in connection with the case.

Sagar, alias Suresh Rathod, was arrested on 13 February.

Nimbargi said that during interrogation, Sagar revealed that he had procured the pistol from Madhya Pradesh and supplied it to Ramesh Lamani.

Police also discovered that he had been bringing country-made pistols from Madhya Pradesh and supplying them to various individuals, he added.

"During our raids at various locations, we recovered nine country-made pistols and 24 live cartridges. In connection with this, we arrested nine people: Prakash Rathod from Vijayapura, Ashok Pandre, Sujit Rathod, Sukhdev Rathod, Prakash Rathod, Ganesh Shivaram Shetty, Channappa Mallappa, Santosh Rathod and Janardan." *—PTI*

'1 LAKH LIVES AT STAKE'

KAS exam errors spark protests, KRV demands re-examination

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Allegations of errors in the Kannada version of the Karnataka Administrative Service (KAS) preliminary re-examination have sparked protests in Bengaluru, with demands for a fresh exam. The Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (KRV) staged a demonstration at Freedom Park on Tuesday, accusing the Karnataka Public Service Commission (KPSC) of negligence and the state government of failing to protect Kannada medium candidates.

The controversy centers around the KAS preliminary exam held on 29 December for the recruitment of 384 gazetted probationary officers. Protesters claim that 79 questions in the Kannada question paper contained errors, putting thousands of Kannada medium aspirants at a disadvantage.

Kannada Rakshana Vedike members protest at Freedom Park, urging solutions for those facing issues in KPSC exams — *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

The Karnataka State Administrative Tribunal (KSAT) has already directed KPSC to halt further proceedings related to the exam until a decision is made on petitions seeking its cancellation.

Amid growing outrage, protesters are urging the government to intervene, rectify the alleged mistakes, and order a re-examination.

They argue that the errors have significantly impacted the chances of Kannada medium candidates qualifying for the next stage of the selection process.

KRV president TA Narayana Gowda, who led the protest, said, "Over one lakh Kannada medium students' futures are at stake. If this had happened to your children, would you remain silent? The government must not allow such injustice." The State government has yet to respond to the demands. *—Salar News*

Vice principal among 3 held for leaking law exam paper

Bengaluru, 18 FEB

The Cyber Economic and Narcotics (CEN) police in the City arrested the vice-principal of a law college and two others for allegedly leaking a law exam question paper on social media in exchange for money. The accused have been identified as Dr Nagaraj, vice-principal of Basavashree College of Law in Kolar, his driver and law student Jagadisha, and Varun Kumar, a student from another law college in Bangarpet. According to the police, the Contract Law-I question paper, scheduled for the Karnataka State Law University (KSLU) exam on 23 January, was leaked on WhatsApp and Telegram groups before the exam. Investigations revealed that Dr Nagaraj had access to the question paper on his phone, which was allegedly copied by Jagadisha and later circulated to students for a price. Meanwhile, Varun Kumar reportedly managed to gain access to sealed question papers a day before the exam, copied the contents, and sold. *—Salar News*

Prez approves prosecution of AAP's Satyendar

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

President Droupadi Murmu has granted the sanction to prosecute AAP leader and former Delhi minister Satyendar Jain in a money-laundering case being investigated by the Enforcement Directorate, sources said on Tuesday. The sanction against the 60-year-old former Delhi health minister was sought under section 218 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita. The Ministry of Home Affairs had requested the President for providing sanction to prosecute Jain on the basis of an Enforcement Directorate (ED) investigation and the presence of "adequate proof", sources said. The ED is now expected to file a fresh supplementary chargesheet informing the court about the approval of the prosecution sanction of the President, sources said. The federal agency booked Jain in a money-laundering case linked to alleged hawala dealings, and arrested him in May 2022. *—PTI*

NEP does not mandate Hindi: BJP spokesperson

CHENNAI, 18 FEB

The National Education Policy does not mandate Hindi anywhere but only recommends learning a third language, BJP state spokesperson ANS Prasad said on Tuesday. Charging the DMK with indulging in "language politics," over the matter, he said it will no longer succeed. The government must implement the three-language policy in Tamil Nadu, ensuring that Dravidian languages like Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam are taught in schools. This would be a just and inclusive step for everyone, he said in a statement. The DMK, which uses the word 'Dravidian' in its name and constantly speaks about the "Dravidian Model," was now denying Dravidian languages their rightful place in Tamil Nadu, he charged. *—PTI*

TN Budget to be presented on 14 March

CHENNAI, 18 FEB

The Budget session of the Tamil Nadu Assembly will begin on 14 March with the presentation of the Budget for 2025-26, Assembly Speaker M Appavu informed on Tuesday. State Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu will present the Budget when the Assembly meets at 9.30 am, he said. "The duration of the session would be decided by the Assembly Business Advisory Committee which would meet on that day," Appavu told reporters here. The first Assembly session for this year was held from 6 to 11 January. It began with the Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi 'walking out' and with the Speaker reading out the Governor's address in Tamil. *—PTI*

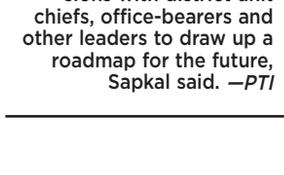


PHOTO: X

M'rashtra's Sapkal takes charge, aims to revive Cong

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

Newly-appointed Maharashtra Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal on Tuesday took charge of his post and said he would work to strengthen the party's organization in the state and bring it back to power. Speaking at the party meeting after taking over from former state unit chief Nana Patole, Sapkal sought cooperation from party workers as well as leaders to revive Congress in Maharashtra. "If we don't try, we will not succeed," he said. He attacked BJP over its drive to enroll one crore members in Maharashtra and its claim to be the biggest party, adding that it was actually weak in the state. He will hold discussions with district unit chiefs, office-bearers and other leaders to draw up a roadmap for the future, Sapkal said. *—PTI*

Midnight CEC appointment by PM 'disrespectful': RaGa

This comes after Gyanesh Kumar was appointed as new CEC

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday said it is "disrespectful" and "discourteous" for the prime minister and home minister to have made a midnight decision to select the new CEC when the process of selection is being challenged in the Supreme Court.

The government late on Monday night appointed Gyanesh Kumar as the new Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), hours after the meeting of the prime minister-led selection committee in which the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha asked the government to defer the meeting in view of the Supreme Court hearing in the matter.

Gandhi also presented a dissent note to the panel, of which Home Minister Amit Shah is also a member.

"During the meeting of the committee to select the next Election Commissioner, I presented a dissent note to the PM and HM, that stated: The most fundamental aspect of an independent Election Commission free from executive interference is the process of choosing the Election Commissioner and Chief Election Commissioner," Gandhi said in post on X.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi PHOTO: PTI

"By violating the Supreme Court order and removing the Chief Justice of India from the committee, the Modi Government has exacerbated the concerns of hundreds of millions of voters over the integrity of our electoral process," he also said in his post while sharing his dissent note.

Congress leader Manickam Tagore said democracy deserves better after the government appointed Gyanesh Kumar as CEC.

Soon after the appointment, Congress general secretary KC Venugopal said the hastily-taken decision shows that the government is keen on circumventing the Supreme Court's scrutiny and getting the appointment done before a clear order kicks in. *—PTI*

> **Congress acting like crybabies, no rule broken in CEC appointment**
>
> - Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Minister

RAJIV KUMAR, WHO OVERSAW LS AND J&K POLLS, DEMITS OFFICE

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Rajiv Kumar PHOTO: PTI

Rajiv Kumar has demitted office as the 25th Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India after nearly three years, having presided over the 2024 Lok Sabha and Jammu & Kashmir assembly elections. He joined the Election Commission (EC) as an Election Commissioner on 1 September 2020 before becoming CEC on 15 May 2022, completing a full electoral cycle in his tenure.

Kumar faced scrutiny from opposition parties over issues such as the use of Electronic Voting Machines and allegations of bias favouring the ruling BJP. In response to persistent criticism, he contemplated a six-month retreat to the "deep Himalayas" post-tenure to "detoxify" himself. Speaking on his last day, he voiced confidence that the EC remains in capable hands with Gyanesh Kumar set to succeed him.

Kumar also addressed concerns regarding electoral promises, urging that political manifestos include clear disclosures about their financial implications.

His tenure was marked by significant reforms in the EC's operations, as well as efforts to address issues surrounding the impact of media on elections, particularly concerning exit polls. An IAS officer of the 1984 batch, Kumar had a distinguished career in various senior government roles prior to his appointment as CEC. *—PTI*

Bengal Assembly: BJP stage sit-in against govt

KOLKATA, 18 FEB

BJP legislators led by Suvendu Adhikari on Tuesday staged a sit-in on the premises of the West Bengal Assembly in protest against alleged appeasement politics by the Mamata Banerjee government.

Shouting slogans like 'Murti bhangar sarkar aar nei darkar' (We don't want a government that cannot stop vandalism of Puja pandals), around 30 BJP legislators squatted on the stairs leading to the main entrance of the Assembly hall.

This comes a day after four BJP legislators — Adhikari, Agnimitra Paul, Bankim Ghosh, and Biswanath Karak — were suspended on Monday for alleged unruly behaviour.

Speaking to reporters, Adhikari said, "We are not fighting against any community. We are against this government, which has failed to prevent vandalisation of Durga, Lakshmi, and Kartik idols in parts of Bengal in recent times."

Adhikari said BJP MLAs would hold a parallel session outside the Assembly to highlight issues faced by the people of the state under the TMC government, including alleged efforts to suppress the festivals of the majority community. *—PTI*

Leader of Opposition in West Bengal Assembly Suvendhu Adhikari, protest against the State government, in Kolkata on Tuesday PHOTO: ANI

Maha Kumbh now 'Mrityu Kumbh': Didi

PHOTO: PTI

KOLKATA, 18 FEB

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday asserted that the Maha Kumbh has turned into a "Mrityu Kumbh" due to incidents of stampede, claiming that the actual toll at the mega religious gathering was suppressed.

At least 30 people died and 60 were injured in a stampede in Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj last month, while 18 people lost their lives in a recent stampede at an overcrowded New Delhi railway station.

"They have hidden hundreds of bodies to bring down the toll. The Maha Kumbh has turned into a 'Mrityu Kumbh' under the BJP rule," Banerjee said during an address in the state assembly. She termed the stampede at the Maha Kumbh "deeply heartbreaking", and stressed the need for better planning and management at large religious gatherings to ensure public safety. *—PTI*

55 CRORE devotees took holy dip at Maha Kumbh

Samajwadi Party leaders holding placards and symbolic 'asthi kalash (ashes)' of 'morality' protest during the Budget Session of UP Assembly, at Vidhan Bhawan in Lucknow PHOTO: PTI

8 Kumbh pilgrims killed in separate road accidents

JAIPUR, 18 FEB

A series of tragic road accidents on Tuesday involving pilgrims returning from the Maha Kumbh mela have resulted in the deaths of eight individuals and left several others injured.

In Rajasthan's Dausa district, a car carrying six residents from Deoli in Tonk collided with a truck on the Dausa bypass, claiming the lives of five passengers.

In a separate accident in Uttar Pradesh's Etawah district, three other pilgrims died and two were seriously injured after their vehicle collided with a truck on the Kanpur-Agra highway, as they were also returning from Prayagraj.

Additionally, in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, a bus carrying Kumbh pilgrims overturned, injuring ten women. The passengers, returning from Prayagraj to Omkareshwar via Ujjain, were transported to a local hospital but are reported to be out of danger. Authorities suspect driver fatigue as a possible cause of the bus accident. *—PTI*

DRAWS BJP'S IRE

T'gana govt lets Muslim staff leave early during Ramzan

HYDERABAD, 18 FEB

The Telangana government has issued a circular permitting Muslim employees to leave offices an hour early during the holy month of Ramzan, a move slammed by the opposition BJP which wondered why such measures are not extended during Hindu festivals.

The saffron party dubbed the move as appeasement politics, but the ruling dispensation said it was nothing new.

According to official sources, the government has permitted its Muslim employees to leave offices at 4PM, ahead by an hour during Ramzan, from 3 March to 31 March, except when their presence is required due to exigencies of service.

PHOTO: X

Hitting out, firebrand BJP MLA Raja Singh said the permission granted to Muslim employees is "appeasement politics at its peak".

"Telangana govt allows early leave for Ramzan but ignores Hindu festivals. Equal rights for all, or none," he said on social media platform 'X,' while also posting a copy of the official circular.

Taking exception to Raja Singh's comments, ruling Congress leader and the government's adviser on minority affairs Mohammed Ali Shabbir said there is nothing new in the government's decision. *—PTI*

Jagan meets Vallabhaneni Vamsi in jail

VIJAYAWADA, 18 FEB

YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) leader YS Jagan Mohan Reddy visited former Gannavaram MLA Vallabhaneni Vamsi in jail on Tuesday, accusing the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government of undermining law and order in Andhra Pradesh.

Vamsi was arrested in Hyderabad over allegations linked to an attack on the TDP office two years ago, during the prior YSRCP administration. He is currently detained in Vijayawada. Jagan claimed that Vamsi's arrest exemplifies the erosion of public safety under TDP rule.

"Vamsi was not present during the attack, and his name was not included in any complaints," Reddy told reporters, alongside Vamsi's wife, Pankaja Sri, and other party members. He contended that a Dalit individual, Satyavardhan, was encouraged to file an 'SC/ST Atrocity case' against Vamsi and that the narrative against him was rekindled following the TDP's return to power. Reddy warned that YSRCP will take action against those who abused their authority if they reclaim governance. *—PTI*

YSR Congress Party leader YS Jagan Mohan Reddy PHOTO: PTI

Udit's 'strangle Mayawati' remark causes a stir

LUCKNOW, 18 FEB

A controversy erupted on Tuesday over Congress leader and former Lok Sabha MP Udit Raj's remarks that BSP chief Mayawati has "strangled the social movement and now the time has come to strangle her", with the BSP demanding his arrest.

Giving references to Mahabharat, Raj told reporters in Lucknow on Monday that "during the Mahabharat war, Arjun asked Lord Krishna how he will kill his cousins and relatives. Lord Krishna said that there are no cousins and relatives, fight for justice and kill your own people".

"Today, my 'Krishna' has told me that first kill your enemy. And, the enemy of social justice, that Ms Mayawati, who strangled the social movement...now time has come to strangle her," he added.

Udit Raj and Mayawati PHOTO: X

Responding to questions about his remarks, Raj told PTI on Tuesday, "The movement of the Bahujan community was strangled...crores of cadres, who built the party by staying hungry and thirsty... this Bahujan movement was strangled by her (Mayawati)."

Calling Udit Raj a "sycophant" of the Congress and the BJP, BSP leader Akash Anand sought strict action against his threats to "strangle" Mayawati. *—PTI*

'THANDA THANDA, COOL COOL'

Eknath Shinde says there is no cold war with CM Fadnavis

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has dismissed rumours of a rift with Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, asserting that there is no "cold war" between the two.

Responding to growing speculation about tensions in the ruling Mahayuti coalition, Shinde addressed the issue during a press conference on Tuesday, saying, "We are 'thanda thanda, cool cool,' there is absolutely no cold war between us."

Shinde, a Shiv Sena leader, emphasized that the ruling alliance's focus remains on opposing those who hinder the state's development. "This is not Maha Vikas Aghadi or the INDI alliance. Our battle is with those who oppose Maharashtra's progress," Shinde added.

Eknath Shinde PHOTO: ANI

He also clarified that his recent reconstitution of a medical aid cell, initially founded by Fadnavis when he was Deputy Chief Minister, is a continuation of their shared goal to support the people.

Despite recent reports of tensions within the government, including the establishment of the new medical cell and a reduction in security for several Shiv Sena MLAs, both Shinde and Fadnavis have maintained that there is no discord.

Fadnavis, commenting on the medical aid cell set up by Shinde, stated, "There is nothing wrong in forming such a cell as it is intended to help people. I had established a similar cell when I was the deputy CM."

Despite this, both leaders have reassured the public of their continued unity in pushing for the development of Maharashtra. *—Agencies*

Remove Sambhaji Maharaj content on Wiki: Fadnavis

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis has instructed the state's cyber police to contact Wikipedia regarding the removal of "objectionable" content about Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj. His comments follow complaints from various organisations claiming inaccuracies on the online encyclopedia after the release of the Hindi film "Chhaava," which depicts the life of Sambhaji Maharaj, son of the esteemed Maratha ruler Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Fadnavis emphasised that the distortion of historical facts on such platforms would not be tolerated. *—PTI*

War hero's name restored at UP school after protest

GHAZIPUR, 18 FEB

Following protests by the family of 1965 war hero Abdul Hamid, education authorities in Ghazipur reinstated his name at the entrance of the government primary school in his native village, days after it was removed during recent paint work. The school, located in Dhamupur village under Jakhanian tehsil, about 35km from the district headquarters, was originally named after Param Vir Chakra awardee Abdul Hamid, who studied there during his childhood. However, five days ago, after repainting the school, the Basic Education Department replaced his name with "PM Shri Composite School" at the main gate, sparking outrage.Initially, education officials attempted to pacify the family by writing Hamid's name on a wall instead of restoring it at the entrance. However, Hamid's grandson, Jameel Ahmad, escalated the matter to higher authorities. *—PTI*

PHOTO: VIDEO GRAB/X

6 killed as dumper truck crashes into van in MP

BHIND, 18 FEB

Six people, including three women, were killed and nearly 20 others injured in a tragic accident in Bhind district, Madhya Pradesh, on Tuesday morning. A dumper truck collided with a van near Jawaharpura village at around 5 am, as a group of people was returning from a wedding. Three victims died at the scene, two others later succumbed to their injuries, and one more died en route to the hospital. The truck is believed to have crashed into the van while attempting to avoid hitting a motorcycle. The injured were sent to Gwalior and Bhind hospitals for treatment. Locals staged a blockade in protest, prompting officials to intervene. Chief Minister Mohan Yadav announced compensation for the victims' families. *—PTI*

Kashmir may see 'drought' amid 80% rain deficit

SRINAGAR, 18 FEB

Kashmir has witnessed a dry winter this year with the months of January and February recording a precipitation deficit of around 80 per cent, which has raised the possibility of drought in the valley this summer, the MeT department officials said. Several water bodies are flowing below the zero level mark at many places while some springs in south Kashmir have dried up completely due to the receding water table, they said. An official of the Irrigation and Flood Control Department said the water level in River Jhelum and several other water bodies was more than a metre below the usual water level for this time of the year. Social media is flooded with videos and images of dried up water bodies with Acchabal springs in south Kashmir having dried up completely. *—PTI*

No trauma: HC refuses relief to blast convict

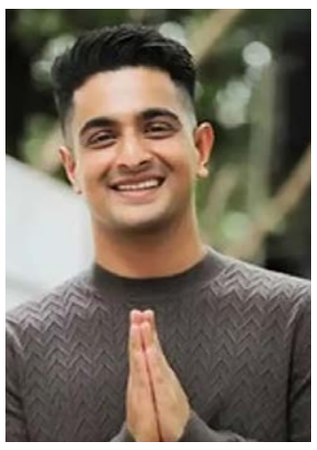
MUMBAI, 18 FEB

The Bombay High Court on 18 February dismissed the claim of Himayat Baig, the convict in the 2010 German Bakery blast case, regarding his solitary confinement. Baig, serving a life sentence, had petitioned that he had been held in solitary confinement at Nashik Central Jail for 12 years, leading to mental health issues. However, the court found no evidence of indefinite solitary confinement and stated that there were no concerns about psychological trauma. Referring to a 2012 Maharashtra prisons circular, the court emphasized that the jail authorities must assess the security threat of inmates. Baig was convicted in 2013 for the blast that killed 17 people.. *—PTI*

SC rebukes Ranveer, but grants him relief

Apex court said the remarks revealed his 'perverted mind'; barred him from leaving country

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB



Supreme Court on Tuesday protected influencer Ranveer Allahbadia from arrest over his distasteful comments during a YouTube show while castigating him for the remarks it described as "showing a perverted mind".

Several FIRs have been filed against Allahbadia, known as BeerBiceps, for the comment on parents and sex on Samay Raina's show 'India's Got Latent'.

A furious court berated Allahbadia for his "unacceptable comments" and said, "... there is something dirty in his mind which has been vomited on the YouTube show."

"The words you have used will make daughters, sisters, parents and even the society feel ashamed. If this is not obscenity, what is it? Why should we quash or club the FIRs against you?" asked Justice Surya Kant.

However, the bench agreed to the submissions of senior advocate Abhinav Chandrachud, representing the influencer, that Allahbadia be protected from arrest.

"Are you defending the kind of language he has used?" Justice Surya Kant asked Chandrachud, who conceded that he himself was "disgusted".

The lawyer, however, said the question was whether the remarks constituted a criminal offence as profanity per se would not amount to obscenity.

"If you can try to attain cheap publicity by saying these kinds of things, there might be others also who might want to get cheap publicity by making threats," the bench said.

The bench directed that no further FIRs shall be lodged against him.

The court also restrained Allahbadia and his associate influencers on the YouTube show from airing any other episode. It directed Allahbadia to deposit his passport at the Thane police station and said he shall not leave the country without the court's permission.

The bench directed Allahbadia to cooperate in the probe of the FIRs lodged at Maharashtra and Assam. "In the name of freedom of speech, no one has a licence to speak whatever they want against the norms of the society," the bench observed. *—PTI*

SC to hear against CEC appointment

The Supreme Court will urgently hear on February 19 petitions challenging the appointments of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (EC) under the 2023 law. Petitioners argue the government's new law, which excludes the Chief Justice of India (CJI) from the selection panel, undermines democratic principles and judicial independence. The law's impact on the independence of EC has been contested by the NGO Association for Democratic Reforms.

SC junks Chandrasekhar's plea for changing jail

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Supreme Court has dismissed a plea by alleged conman Sukesh Chandrasekhar seeking to be transferred from Mandoli Jail in Delhi to another prison, except those in Punjab or Delhi. The bench of Justices Bela M. Trivedi and P. B. Varale described the plea as an abuse of the legal process, citing similar petitions filed by Chandrasekhar that had previously been rejected.

The court noted that Chandrasekhar's grievance was with the Delhi government, but with a change in administration, his complaint no longer held relevance. "How can you keep filing the same petition?" the bench remarked, criticising the abuse of the legal process.

zChandrasekhar's counsel, Senior Advocate Shoeb Alam, argued that his client's fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Constitution, including the right to be near his family, were being violated. He requested a transfer to a prison in Karnataka or a nearby state.

Chandrasekhar, who faces charges of money laundering and cheating, previously claimed to be under surveillance. *—PTI*

The clash involved members of both communities throwing stones at each other *PHOTO: X/ @DISTRICT_JAMUI*

Police arrest 10 after communal clashes in Bihar

JAMUI, 18 FEB

The police in Jamui, Bihar, have arrested 10 individuals, including a woman known as 'Hindu Sherni,' in the violent clash that broke out between two communities on Sunday. The incident, which occurred in the Baliadih area of Jhajha during a religious procession, left three people injured.

Jamui District Magistrate Abhilasha Sharma confirmed the arrests, including that of Khushboo Pandey, who is widely recognised for her association with the incident. Sharma also stated that internet services, which were suspended after the violence, would be restored by the evening.

The clash involved members of both communities throwing stones at each other, prompting the police to intervene and control the situation. In response to the unrest, a police officer was suspended for dereliction of duty. To prevent further escalation, the district police conducted a flag march in the area on Monday and registered a case against 50-60 unidentified individuals.

Sanjay Kumar, the Station House Officer of Jhajha police station, stated that the arrested individuals were charged with taking out the procession without prior approval from the authorities. Despite the tensions, the District Magistrate assured that the situation was now under control. *—PTI*

Prosecution seeks death for Sajjan in 1984 Sikh riots

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The prosecution has demanded the death penalty for former Congress MP Sajjan Kumar in connection with the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, describing his actions as a "rarest of rare" crime. Special judge Kaveri Baweja was presented with a written submission from the prosecution on Tuesday, seeking the harshest punishment for Kumar in a murder case involving the killing of Jaswant Singh and his son Tarundeep Singh on 1 November, 1984.

The court deferred the matter to 21 February after Kumar's counsel requested more time to present their arguments. Kumar, currently serving time in Tihar jail, is accused of orchestrating large-scale violence during the riots, which were sparked by the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The mob, allegedly led by Kumar, looted, set properties ablaze, and killed the victims. *—PTI*

STUDENTS EVICTED

KIIT mistreated Nepali students, alleges deceased's dad

BHUBANESWAR, 18 FEB

Family members of a Nepal's girl student who died by suicide reach the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology in Bhubaneswar *PHOTO: PTI*

The death of Prakriti Lamsal, a third-year B Tech student at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) in Bhubaneswar, has sparked tension on the campus and allegations of mistreatment of Nepali students.

Lamsal's father, Sunil Lamsal, arrived in Bhubaneswar for his daughter's post-mortem and expressed his concerns, accusing the institute of mistreating Nepali students. He also criticised the eviction of several Nepali students from the hostel amid the incident, describing it as unjust.

Meanwhile, two officers from the Nepal embassy in Delhi are likely to visit the institute on Tuesday.

KIIT has speculated that Prakriti may have died by suicide, potentially linked to an affair with another student, while her cousin filed a police complaint alleging blackmail by a male student. The police have taken swift action, with an arrest made in connection to the alleged suicide.

The situation escalated when KIIT reportedly evicted Nepali students from the hostel and left them at Cuttack railway station without travel arrangements.

In response, Nepal's Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli condemned the actions and confirmed that embassy officials were sent to assist affected students. Odisha's Higher Education Minister, Suryabanshi Suraj, assured that the state government would facilitate the students' return to the campus. *—PTI*

Another ragging incident surfaces in Kerala

T'PURAM, 18 FEB

A first-year biotechnology student at Karyavattom Government College in Thiruvananthapuram has accused a group of senior students of brutally ragging him on 11 February. Bins Jose, the victim, claimed that he was assaulted, harassed, and threatened by seven senior students while walking on the campus with his friend, Abhishek. Jose said his friend managed to escape and alerted the college principal.

The student alleged that the seniors beat him with a bamboo pole and a belt, then dragged him to a unit room, where he was locked in. His shirt was removed, and he was forced to kneel. When he asked for water, one of the seniors allegedly spat into a half-filled glass and gave it to him to drink.

Furthermore, the seniors reportedly threatened him with dire consequences if he reported the incident and even forced him to file a complaint against his friend, accusing him of the assault.

Jose immediately lodged a complaint with the college authorities and the police on the day of the incident. *—PTI*

HC allows 'trial run' of Union Carbide waste disposal

JABALPUR, 18 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

The Madhya Pradesh High Court has permitted the state government to conduct a trial run for the disposal of 40-year-old chemical waste from the defunct Union Carbide factory in Bhopal. The waste will be incinerated in three phases, starting on 27 February at the Pithampur disposal plant in Dhar district.

Advocate General Prashant Singh confirmed that each phase will dispose of 10 tons of waste, with the disposal rate increasing from 135 kg per hour in the first phase to 270 kg per hour by the third phase. The trial is part of the government's efforts to address local opposition to the disposal process, linked to the 1984 Bhopal Gas Tragedy that killed over 5,000 people. The government has conducted an awareness campaign, and the results of the trial will be submitted to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). The CPCB will then determine the 'feed rate' for the disposal of the remaining 337 tons of hazardous waste.

A compliance report will be presented to the court by 27 March, with the final disposal process contingent on the trial's outcome. *—PTI*

FIR filed in Ayodhya 'VIP darshan' case

AYODHYA, 18 FEB

Devotees' rush at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya on Tuesday *PHOTO: PTI*

Ayodhya police have taken action against a group of bikers accused of charging exorbitant fares from pilgrims visiting the Ram temple. In an operation conducted by the Ram Janmabhoomi police station on Monday and Tuesday, 30 bikes were seized.

With the influx of devotees due to the Maha Kumbh in nearby Prayagraj, authorities had restricted vehicle entry into Ayodhya. Bikers exploited this situation, charging pilgrims between Rs 100 and Rs 300 per kilometre for rides to the Ram temple and other shrines. Local complaints led to the crackdown, and police vowed to continue the operation. Meanwhile, a woman pilgrim from Maharashtra, Kavita Shetty, has filed an FIR alleging fraud over a "VIP darshan" at the Ram temple. *—PTI*

HUSBAND KILLS WIFE

5-year-old's sketch unravels murder in UP

JHANSI, 18 FEB

Sonali's father explained that his daughter had endured dowry-related harassment since her marriage *PHOTO: REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE*

A five-year-old girl's drawing has unravelled a murder disguised as suicide in Shiv Parivar Colony, Jhansi. Sonali Budholia, 28, was found dead in her home on Monday, with her in-laws claiming she had hanged herself. However, her young daughter, Darshika, revealed a different story, tearfully telling family members that her father, Sandeep Budholia, had strangled her mother after an argument. Darshika even attempted to depict the horrific event in a drawing.

Initially, Sonali's in-laws reported the death as suicide. This account was challenged by Sonali's family, who alleged she had been murdered, citing ongoing harassment for dowry. Sonali's father, Sanjeev Tripathi, from Lidhoura, Madhya Pradesh, explained that his daughter had endured dowry-related harassment since her marriage six years prior. The family had even filed a police complaint, leading Sonali to live with her parents for two years. A recent mediation had resulted in a reconciliation and her return to her husband's home in Jhansi.

- A recent mediation had resulted in a reconciliation and her return to her husband's home in Jhansi.

Following Darshika's revelation and the escalating tensions between the families, police intervened. Superintendent of Police (City) Gyanendra Kumar Singh confirmed the arrest of Sandeep Budholia, the deceased's husband, a medical representative. A case has been registered against him, his mother, brother, sister-in-law, and other unnamed individuals. The post-mortem examination is underway, and further investigations are continuing. *—PTI*

Minors well aware of 'bad touch', says HC

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

PHOTO: ANI

The Bombay High Court has refused to quash a court martial order sentencing a former Lieutenant Colonel to five years' imprisonment for sexually assaulting an 11-year-old girl, noting the victim was well aware of the "bad touch".

The girl's demonstration in court regarding the specific manner in which the accused behaved with her once her father left the room was depicted with immense clarity, a division bench of Justices Revati Mohite Dere and Neela Gokhale said on Monday.

The bench dismissed a petition filed by the accused, challenging the January 2024 order passed by the Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT) confirming the five-year imprisonment imposed on him by the General Court Martial (GCM).

In March 2021, the GCM of the Army held him guilty for committing aggravated sexual assault on a minor girl and sexual harassment under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

He was sentenced to the minimum punishment of five years' imprisonment.

The former Army officer in his plea in the HC claimed he had no ill intention and that he touched the girl and asked for a kiss only out of "grandfatherly/fatherly" love for the child. *—PTI*

NO KINGS DAY PROTEST

People take part in the 'No Kings Day' protest on Presidents' Day in Washington, in support of federal workers and against recent actions by President Donald Trump and Elon Musk 2025, near the Capitol in Washington. Nearly 1,000 people marched in the snow from the Statehouse in Boston to City Hall, chanting 'Elon Musk has got to go'. ***PHOTO: PTI***

Ukraine isn't invited to its own peace talks

Ukraine has not been invited to a key meeting between American and Russian officials in Saudi Arabia this week to decide what peace in the country might look like.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Ukraine will "never accept" any decisions in talks without its participation to end Russia's three-year war in the country.

A decision to negotiate the sovereignty of Ukrainians without them – as well as US President Donald Trump's blatantly extortionate attempt to claim half of Ukraine's rare mineral wealth as the price for ongoing US support – reveals a lot about how Trump sees Ukraine and Europe.

But this is not the first time large powers have colluded to negotiate new borders or spheres of influence without the input of the people who live there.

Such high-handed power politics rarely ends well for those affected, as these six historical examples show.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Ukraine will never accept any decisions in talks without its participation ***PHOTO: PTI***

1. The Scramble for Africa

In the winter of 1884–85, German leader Otto von Bismarck invited the powers of Europe to Berlin for a conference to formalise the division of the entire African continent among them. Not a single African was present at the conference that would come to be known as "The Scramble for Africa".

Among other things, the conference led to the creation of the Congo Free State under Belgian control, the site of colonial atrocities that killed millions.

Germany also established the colony of German South West Africa (present-day Namibia), where the first genocide of the 20th century was later perpetrated against its colonised peoples.

2. The Tripartite Convention

It wasn't just Africa that was divided up this way. In 1899, Germany and the United States held a conference and forced an agreement on the Samoans to split their islands between the two powers.

This was despite the Samoans expressing a desire for either self-rule or a confederation of Pacific states with Hawai'i.

As "compensation" for missing out in Samoa, Britain received uncontested primacy over Tonga.

German Samoa came under the rule of New Zealand after the first world war and remained a territory until 1962. American Samoa (in addition to several other Pacific islands) remain US territories to this day.

3. The Sykes-Picot Agreement

As the first world war was well under way, British and French representatives sat down to agree how they'd divide up the Ottoman Empire after it was over. As an enemy power, the Ottomans were not invited to the talks.

Together, England's Mark Sykes and France's François Georges-Picot redrew the Middle East's borders in line with their nations' interests.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement ran counter to commitments made in a series of letters known as the Hussein-McMahon correspondence. In these letters, Britain promised to support Arab independence from Turkish rule.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement also ran counter to promises Britain made in the Balfour Declaration to back Zionists who wanted to build a new Jewish homeland in Ottoman Palestine.

The agreement became the wellspring of decades of conflict and colonial misrule in the Middle East, the consequences of which continue to be felt today.

4. The Munich Agreement

In September 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier met with Italy's fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, and Germany's Adolf Hitler to sign what became known as the Munich Agreement.

The leaders sought to prevent the spread of war throughout Europe after Hitler's Nazis had fomented an uprising and began attacking the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland. They did this under the pretext of protecting German minorities. No Czechoslovakians were invited to the meeting.

The meeting is still seen by many as the "Munich Betrayal" – a classic example of a failed appeasement of a belligerent power in the false hope of staving off war.

5. The Évian Conference

In 1938, 32 countries met in Évian-les-Bains, France, to decide how to deal with Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany.

Before the conference started, Britain and the US had agreed not to put pressure on one another to lift the quota of Jews they would accept in either the US or British Palestine.

While Golda Meir (the future Israeli leader) attended the conference as an observer, neither she nor any other representatives of the Jewish people were permitted to take part in the negotiations.

The attendees largely failed to come to an agreement on accepting Jewish refugees, with the exception of the Dominican Republic. And most Jews in Germany were unable to leave before Nazism reached its genocidal nadir in the Holocaust.

6. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

As Hitler planned his invasion of Eastern Europe, it became clear his major stumbling block was the Soviet Union. His answer was to sign a disingenuous non-aggression treaty with the USSR.

The treaty, named after Vyacheslav Molotov and Joachim von Ribbentrop (the Soviet and German foreign ministers), ensured the Soviet Union would not respond when Hitler invaded Poland.

It also carved up Europe into Nazi and Soviet spheres. This allowed the Soviets to expand into Romania and the Baltic states, attack Finland and take its own share of Polish territory. Unsurprisingly, some in Eastern Europe view the current US-Russia talks over Ukraine's future as a revival of this kind of secret diplomacy that divided the smaller nations of Europe between large powers in the second world war. *—PTI*

SALAR ساڈا

5B globally lack access to medical oxygen: Lancet

Five billion people or nearly two-third of the world's population lack access to medical oxygen, with highest inequities in low- and middle-income countries, estimated a new Lancet Commission report.

The report by the Lancet Global Health Commission on Medical Oxygen Security is the world's first estimate of how unequally medical oxygen is distributed, gaps in coverage of patients in need, along with costs required to bridge these gaps.

Medical oxygen is essential in a healthcare system for treating patients, including those of surgery, asthma, trauma and maternal and child care.

It is also critical to a country's pandemic preparedness by helping prevent a repeat of the Covid-19 oxygen shortages and the mass fatalities that resulted, said an international team of researchers, including those from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

In this study, the researchers said that 82 per cent of patients worldwide requiring medical oxygen live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and nearly 70 per cent concentrated in south and east Asia, the Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa.

The patients include those with acute medical and surgical conditions, and long-term oxygen needs due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

However, less than one in three people needing oxygen for medical or surgical conditions receive the life-saving gas due to gaps in service contact, readiness, provision and quality, leaving almost 70 per cent of the patients without coverage.

The gaps are even higher in regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa (91 per cent) and South Asia (78 per cent), the authors said.

- The commission report also suggested recommendations for how governments, industry, global health agencies, academic institutions and civil society can work together to strengthen health systems in providing access to medical oxygen.

In a case study accompanying the report, the authors described the scenario of medical oxygen in India, especially as observed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The pandemic had a catastrophic effect not just because of the rates of contagion and the virulence of the disease but also because of the drastic scarcity in life-saving resources such as medical oxygen," the team from One Health Trust, India, wrote.

They added that with hospitals largely replying on third-party vendors for meeting their oxygen demand pre- Covid-19, the surge in demand during the pandemic led to black-marketing and hoarding.

Desperate requests for medical oxygen were also raised on social media and in exceptional cases, the court intervened by issuing orders against supplying agencies and the government for replenishing oxygen supplies, the authors said.

The commission report also suggested recommendations for how governments, industry, global health agencies, academic institutions and civil society can work together to strengthen health systems in providing access to medical oxygen.

The authors added that medical oxygen is a highly cost-effective investment to advance global public health that will accelerate the world's progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals for health by 2030, but also help countries prepare for the next pandemic. *—PTI*

In this study, the researchers said that 82 per cent of patients worldwide requiring medical oxygen live in low- and middle-income countries ***PHOTO: FREEPIK***

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

B'desh unrest reveals bias at the heart of Google's search engine

Google's search engine handles the vast majority of online searches worldwide. By one estimate, it fields 6.3 million queries every second.

Because of the search engine's enormous scale, its outputs can have outsized effects. And, while Google's search results are shaped by ostensibly neutral rules and processes, research has shown these algorithms often produce biased results.

This problem of algorithmic bias is again being highlighted by recent escalating tensions between India and Bangladesh and cases of violence against Bangladeshi citizens in India and violence against Hindus in Bangladesh. A pro-Indian misinformation and disinformation campaign is exploiting this algorithmic bias to further its agenda – an agenda that has been described as Islamophobic and alarmist.

This kind of misinformation has been implicated in several riots and violent incidents in Bangladesh.

All of this serves as an important reminder of the power Google's search engine has in shaping public perceptions of any event – and its vulnerability to being exploited. It's also an important reminder to anyone who uses Google's search engine to engage critically with the results it dishes up, rather than accepting them at face value.

What is algorithmic bias?

The algorithms that power Google's search engine are trained on massive amounts of data. This data is gathered by computer bots which crawl billions of pages on the Internet and automatically analyse their content and quality. This information is stored in a large database, which Google's search engine relies on to serve up relevant results whenever it receives a query.

But this process doesn't capture every website on the Internet. It is also governed by predetermined rules about what is high quality and what is low quality, and reflects existing biases in data. For example, even though only 16 per cent of the world's population speaks English, it accounts for 55 per cent of all written content online. This means the reality of life on the ground in non-English speaking countries is often not reflected in Google search results. This is especially true for those countries located in the Global South. This lack of representation perpetuates real-world biases. It can also hinder a nuanced public understanding of global issues.

What's happening between Bangladesh and India?

Relations between Muslim-majority Bangladesh and neighbouring India, which is currently led by the Hindu nationalist BJP government, have deteriorated recently.

In November, Bangladeshi authorities arrested Hindu leader Chinmoy Krishna Das on sedition charges. This triggered violent clashes between his supporters and police ***PHOTO: PTI***

In August last year, youth-led anti-government protests erupted in Bangladesh.

These protests resulted in the downfall of prime minister Sheikh Hasina's long-lasting autocratic regime, which had been supported by the Indian government.

An interim government filled the void. But certain Indian media outlets have leveraged sensitive issues such as Hindu minority rights to undermine its legitimacy.

In November, Bangladeshi authorities arrested Hindu leader Chinmoy Krishna Das on sedition charges over allegations he had disrespected the Bangladeshi flag. This triggered violent clashes between his supporters and police. These clashes resulted in the death of a Muslim lawyer.

Hindu activists also attacked a Bangladeshi consulate in India.

There have also been verified instances of mob violence against Hindus in Bangladesh. However, the Bangladeshi government claims these incidents are politically motivated rather than communal attacks.

The unrest intensified earlier this month, with thousands of protestors destroying the family home of deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka.

Boosting a disinformation campaign

A disinformation campaign based in India has exaggerated some cases of religious violence against Hindus in Bangladesh.

This campaign has been boosted by Google's algorithmic bias.

For example, an analysis by the Tech Global Institute of Google search results about Chinmoy Krishna Das's arrest between 25 November and 20 December last year found a "consistent pattern of bias".

Specifically, Indian news outlets – including Hindu ultranationalist news outlets – "disproportionately" dominated the top search results. This overshadowed

factual reporting from credible Bangladeshi media outlets [...] despite the search originating from within Bangladesh, the country where the incident originally occurred.

This bias was also evident in search queries coming from overseas. For example, roughly 90 per cent of the top results about Chinmoy Krishna Das were from Indian outlets when searched from Australia and the United States. Bangladeshi news outlets featured on the thirteenth and fourteenth pages of results.

Indian news outlets – unlike their Bangladeshi counterparts – produce a substantial amount of content in English.

They also employ more advanced search engine optimisation – or SEO – techniques, such as using effective keywords and sensationalist headlines. This gives them an advantage in Google search results compared to their Bangladeshi counterparts.

Another investigation by Bangladeshi fact-checking outlet Rumor Scanner in December 2024 found 72 per cent of social media accounts spreading fake and misinformation are located in India.

The Conversation asked Google a series of questions about its search engine. It did not receive a response.

An illustrative case of a global problem

Bangladesh is an illustrative case of the global problem of algorithmic bias. It highlights how search engines can be exploited to promote disinformation and misinformation and powerfully shape people's perceptions about what's happening in the world.

It also highlights how everybody should think critically about the information they find online about the current situation in Bangladesh. Or about any news event, for that matter.

The case also reinforces the urgent need for policymakers, tech companies and governments to work together to effectively address algorithmic bias. This is especially urgent in the Global South, where marginal voices remain silenced. *—The Conversation*

PHOTO: PIXABAY

Pro-Russian hackers attack Italian websites

MILAN, 18 FEB

A pro-Russian hacker group attacked Italian government websites on Tuesday in what it said was a reaction to a speech by Italian President Sergio Mattarella that compared Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the Nazis' "wars of conquest." The NoName57 hacker group, which announced the attacks on social media, hit the websites of the defense, interior and transport ministries, as well as law enforcement agencies. Access to the sites was spotty. The group said on Monday it attacked Italian banks, ports, airports and local transport agencies, but those attacks did not cause major disruptions. In a speech in Marseille, France on February 5, Mattarella said that patterns that led to World War II were repeating, including "wars of conquest." *—PTI*

Turkey detains 282 PKK suspects

ANKARA, 18 FEB

Turkish police have detained 282 suspects in the past five days in a large-scale operation targeting the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said on Tuesday. The suspects were detained across 51 provinces, the minister said on the X social media platform. The detentions came despite renewed efforts between Ankara and the PKK to resolve a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives. These efforts are expected to include a call by the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan, for his group to lay down arms. Yerlikaya said those detained are suspected of providing financial support to the PKK, recruiting members, engaging in propaganda and participating in violent street protests. *—PTI*

Four security personnel killed in Pak's Kurram

PESHAWAR, 18 FEB

Four paramilitary personnel were illed and five others injured in a militant attack in Pakistan's violence-hit Kurram, where an aid convoy was also targeted. According to security officials, the militants ambushed the paramilitary Kurram Militia squad in Lower Kurram's Ochit area late on Monday, where an aid convoy carrying essential supplies was ambushed earlier in the day. The injured and dead were shifted to a hospital, where the condition of one injured was stated to be critical. The military, which typically issues statements in such situations, has yet to comment. The attack in Kurram killed a truck driver and injured 15 others. Late last night, another person succumbed to injuries, said officials. *— PTI*

Russia, US discuss war in Saudi without Ukraine

Meeting marks Trump move to reverse isolating Russia

RIYADH, 18 FEB

Senior officials from Russia and the US met in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday to begin talks on improving ties and negotiating an end to the war in Ukraine.

Delegations led by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met at the Diriyah Palace in Riyadh. The meeting marks another pivotal step by the Trump administration to reverse US policy on isolating Russia and is meant to pave the way for a meeting between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Trump earlier this month upended US policy toward Ukraine and Russia by saying he and Putin had agreed to begin negotiations on ending the war.

Ukrainian officials aren't taking part in the meeting, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Monday that his country won't accept the outcome if Kyiv doesn't take part.

Rubio was accompanied by US national security adviser Mike Waltz and Special Envoy Steve Witkoff, while Lavrov sat next to the Kremlin's foreign affairs adviser, Yuri Ushakov. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan and national security adviser Musaed al Alban joined Rubio, Lavrov and others for the start of the meeting but were expected to leave early in the talks.

Ushakov said Monday the talks would be "purely bilateral" and would not include Ukrainian officials.

The talks mark a significant expansion of US-Russian contacts nearly three years into a war that has seen ties fall to the lowest level in decades.

Lavrov and then-US Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked briefly on the sidelines of a G-20 meeting in India nearly two years ago, and in the fall of 2022, US and Russian spymasters met in Turkiye amid Washington's concerns that Moscow could resort to nuclear weapons amid battlefield setbacks.

The recent US diplomatic blitz on the war has sent Kyiv and key allies scrambling to ensure a seat at the table amid concerns that Washington and Moscow could press ahead with a deal that won't be favourable to them.

France has called an emergency meeting of European Union countries and the UK on Monday to decide how to respond. *—PTI*

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (L) said his country won't accept the outcome if Kyiv is not made a part of the talks. Us president Donald Trump (C) earlier this month upended US policy toward Ukraine and Russia by saying he and Putin (R) had agreed to begin negotiations on ending the war. **PHOTO: X**

A Delta Airlines plane from Minneapolis crashed at Toronto's Pearson Airport on Monday **PHOTO: PTI**

Jet flips on Toronto runway, 80 aboard safe

TORONTO, 18 FEB

A Delta Air Lines jet flipped on its roof while landing Monday at Toronto's Pearson Airport, but all 80 people on board survived and those hurt had relatively minor injuries, the airport's chief executive said.

Snow blown by winds gusting to 40 mph (65 kph) swirled when the flight from Minneapolis carrying 76 passengers and four crew attempted to land at around 2:15 pm. Communications between the tower and pilot were normal on approach and it's not clear what went so drastically wrong when the plane touched down. Peter Carlson, a passenger travelling to Toronto for a paramedics conference, said the landing was "very forceful."

"All the sudden everything just kind of went sideways and then next thing I know it's kind of a blink and I'm upside down still strapped in," he told CBC News.

Canadian authorities held two brief news conferences but provided no details on the crash. Video posted to social media showed the aftermath with the Mitsubishi CRJ-900LR overturned, the fuselage seemingly intact and firefighters dousing what was left of the fire as passengers climbed out and walked across the tarmac.

"We are very grateful there was no loss of life and relatively minor injuries," Deborah Flint, CEO of Greater Toronto Airports Authority, told reporters.

Delta CEO Ed Bastian said in a statement that "the hearts of the entire global Delta family are with those affected."

Toronto Pearson Fire Chief Todd Aitken said 18 passengers were taken to the hospital. *—PTI*

China accuses the Philippine ship of trespassing in the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal. **PHOTO: PTI**

China taunts Philippines over disputed shoal

SCARBOROUGH, 18 FEB

A Chinese navy helicopter flew within 3 metres of a Philippine patrol plane on Tuesday in a disputed area of the South China Sea, as the Filipino pilot warned by radio: "You are flying too close, you are very dangerous."

The helicopter was attempting to force a Cessna Caravan turbo-prop plane belonging to the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources out of what China claims is its airspace over the hotly disputed Scarborough Shoal off the northwestern Philippines.

An Associated Press journalist and other invited foreign media representatives on the plane witnessed the tense 30-minute standoff as the Philippine plane pressed on with its low-altitude patrol around Scarborough with the Chinese navy helicopter hovering close above it or flying to its left in cloudy weather.

"You are flying too close, you are very dangerous and endangering the lives of our crew and passengers," the Philippine pilot told the Chinese navy helicopter by radio at one point. "Keep away and distance your aircraft from us, you are violating the safety standard set by FAA and ICAO."

The pilot was referring to the standard distance between aircraft required by the US Federal Aviation Administration and the International Civil Aviation Organisation to prevent air disasters. *—PTI*

DOGE seeks access to sensitive IRS data

WASHINGTON, 18, FEB

Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency is seeking access to troves of sensitive taxpayer data at the IRS, two people familiar with the inner workings of the plan who were not authorised to discuss the matter publicly told AP on Monday.

If successful, Musk and his group would have access to millions of tightly controlled files that include taxpayer information, bank records and other sensitive records. The people who spoke to the AP and requested anonymity said DOGE is specifically seeking to access the IRS' Integrated Data Retrieval System, which enables employees "to have instantaneous visual access to certain taxpayer accounts", according to the IRS website.

Advocates fear that the potential unlawful release of taxpayer records could be used to maliciously target Americans, violate their privacy and create other ramifications.

Harrison Fields, a White House spokesman, said in an emailed statement that "waste, fraud, and abuse have been deeply entrenched in our broken system for far too long. It takes direct access to the system to identify and fix it".

"DOGE will continue to shine a light on the fraud they uncover as the American people deserve to know what their government has been spending their hard-earned tax dollars on," he said.

Senators Ron Wyden, D-Ore and Elizabeth Warren sent a letter to acting IRS Commissioner Douglas O'Donnell, demanding copies of any memos that would grant IRS system access to Musk or DOGE. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

US fires hundreds of aviation staff

WASHINGTON, 18 FEB

The Trump administration has begun firing several hundred Federal Aviation Administration employees, upending staff on a busy air travel weekend and just weeks after a fatal midair collision at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport last month. Probationary workers were targeted in late-night emails on Friday notifying them they had been fired, David Spero, president of the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists union, said in a statement. The impacted workers include personnel hired for FAA radar, landing and navigational aid maintenance, one air traffic controller told AP. *—PTI*

Judge challenges DOGE authority

WASHINGTON, 18 FEB

A federal judge on Monday questioned the authority of billionaire Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency but was sceptical of a request to block DOGE from accessing sensitive data and firing employees at half a dozen federal agencies. US District Judge Tanya Chutkan held a hearing on a request from 14 states for a temporary restraining order seeking to curtail Musk's power in President Donald Trump's quest to downsize the federal government. Chutkan said she would rule within 24 hours. Trump appointed Musk to lead DOGE in a push to slash the federal workforce and reduce or end disfavoured programmes. *—PTI*

Rajapaksa son indicted in fund diversion

COLOMBO, 18 FEB

Namal Rajapaksa, the eldest son of former president and prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, was on Tuesday indicted and released on bail by the High Court here for an alleged misappropriation out of an Indian investment prior to 2015.

Leader of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, Namal Rajapaksa is the only member of the Rajapaksa family now a serving member of parliament. The Rajapaksas say they are being targeted on a political witch hunt.

The case is to be next heard on 27 March.

caption **PHOTO: X**

Namal Rajapaksa was arrested in June 2016 for allegedly misusing Sri Lankan Rupees 70 million from the Krrish Hotel project to develop the game of rugby in the island nation. He had been a Sri Lanka international rugby player.

The Krish hotel project, located in the heart of Colombo's commercial district, was aborted and the construction remains unfinished.

Namal Rajapaksa was quizzed by the police after the new NPP government revived the Krish case - stalled since 2016.

A week later, his younger brother Yoshitha was arrested after a similar questionable property case was revived.

Yoshitha Rajapaksa is also facing indictment over the case. The NPP government says they would revive all stalled cases to deliver justice, prompting the Rajapaksas to claim it as a political witch hunt. *—PTI*

Vatican cancels events as pope remains ill

ROME, 18 FEB

The Vatican has cancelled papal audiences through the weekend and delegated others to cover for Pope Francis, who remains hospitalised with a multi-pronged respiratory infection. The 88-year-old pontiff was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital on Friday after his bronchitis worsened. On Monday, doctors diagnosed him with a polymicrobial respiratory tract infection, a combination of viruses, bacteria, and possibly other organisms affecting his lungs.

The cancellations have impacted upcoming events for the Vatican's Holy Year, a

Pope Francis **PHOTO: X**

once-in-a-quarter-century celebration aimed at attracting millions of pilgrims to Rome. Special papal audiences and Masses throughout 2025, including those planned for this weekend, are now in doubt due to the pope's illness.

Francis had a peaceful night, ate breakfast, and read the newspapers on Tuesday morning, according to Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni. A more detailed medical update is expected later.

The Holy Year weekend, traditionally dedicated to deacons, had been planned for Francis to ordain new deacons, but the Mass will now be celebrated by the archbishop. The next major Jubilee event involving the pope is scheduled for 8-9 March, dedicated to volunteers. Having had part of one lung removed due to a past infection, Francis is prone to bronchitis, but refusal to rest during this recent bout has led to an extended hospitalisation. *—PTI*

N Korea slams US, Asia for 'absurd' dreams

SEOUL, 18 FEB

North Korea on Tuesday criticised the United States and Asian neighbours for pursuing the "absurd" goal of denuclearising the North and said it will push to expand its nuclear forces under the direction of its authoritarian leader Kim Jong Un.

The statement by Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry came after the top diplomats of the US, South Korea and Japan met at a security conference in Germany and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening military cooperation and reinforcing an international sanctions regime to counter Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.

The North Korean ministry accused the US of trying to realise an "outdated and absurd plan" of denuclearising the North and warned of "overwhelming and decisive counteraction" against its rivals if it perceives its security is under threat.

Kim Jong Un **PHOTO: X**

It said the North will "consistently adhere to the new line of bolstering the nuclear force" established by Kim and "thoroughly deter the US and its vassal forces" from threats and blackmail against the North's sovereignty.

US Secretary of State Mark Rubio held a three-way meeting with the South Korean and Japanese foreign ministers in Munich, Germany, on Saturday and reaffirmed their commitment to the North's "complete denuclearisation". *—PTI*

RETURN OF NORMALCY

Lebanon looks at peace as Israeli army withdraws

DEIR MIMAS, 18 FEB

Israeli forces withdrew from border villages in southern Lebanon on Tuesday, under a deadline spelled out in a US-brokered ceasefire agreement that ended the latest Israel-Hezbollah war.

Lebanese soldiers moved into the areas from where the Israeli troops pulled out and began clearing roadblocks set up by Israeli forces and checking for unexploded ordnance. They blocked the main road leading to the villages, preventing anyone from entering while the military was looking for any explosives left behind.

Most of the villages waited by the roadside for permission to go and check on their homes but some pushed aside the roadblocks to march in. Many of their houses were demolished during the more than year-long conflict or in the two months after November's ceasefire agreement when Israeli forces were still occupying the area.

According to the White House's Draft Israel–Hezbollah Ceasefire Proposal, if an agreement is reached, the Lebanese army will be deployed to the points where Israel has withdrawn **PHOTO: X**

- The Israeli troops have remained in five strategic overlook points inside Lebanon – a sore point with Lebanese officials and the militant Hezbollah group

The Israeli troops, however, have remained in five strategic overlook points inside Lebanon – a sore point with Lebanese officials and the militant Hezbollah group, who have maintained that Israel is required to make a full withdrawal by Tuesday.

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said the Israeli army "will stay in a buffer zone in Lebanon in five control posts" to guard against any ceasefire violations by Hezbollah. He also said the army had erected new posts on the Israeli side of the border and sent reinforcements there.

"We are determined to provide full security to every northern community," Katz said. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Gold rises to ₹88.5K per 10 gm, silver climbs ₹800

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Gold prices rose Rs 300 to Rs 88,500 per 10 grams in the national capital on Tuesday amid firm global trends, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity had ended at Rs 88,200 per 10 grams on Monday. Gold of 99.5 per cent purity advanced Rs 300 to Rs 88,100 per 10 grams. Silver prices also jumped Rs 800 to Rs 99,000 per kg from the previous close of Rs 98,200 per kg. In futures trade on the MCX, gold contracts for April delivery jumped Rs 435 to Rs 85,490 per 10 grams. Silver futures for March delivery also appreciated Rs 439 to Rs 96,019 per kg on the Multi Commodity Exchange. Meanwhile, spot gold in the overseas markets rose nearly USD 16 to USD 2,912.50 per ounce. *—PTI*

Rupee falls 8 paise to close at 86.96 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

Rupee depreciated 8 paise to close at 86.96 (provisional) against US dollar weighed down by sustained foreign fund outflows and an uptick in the US Dollar index. Forex traders said there is a negative bias for the USD/INR pair as foreign investors continue to sell domestic equities and the RBI support is tapering off slowly. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.94 and touched the high of 86.91 against the greenback during intraday. It also touched the low of 86.98 before ending the session at 86.96 (provisional) against the dollar, logging a loss of 8 paise from its previous close. On Monday, the rupee depreciated 17 paise to close at 86.88 against the US dollar. Traders said disappointing trade deficit data from the domestic markets too pressurised the rupee. *—PTI*

Check Point to open R&D Centre in Bengaluru

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Cyber security solutions provider Check Point Software Technologies on Tuesday announced plans to set up its first Asia-Pacific R&D Centre in Bengaluru. The Research and Development (R&D) facility will enhance Check Point's ability to deliver secure, high-performance connectivity for enterprises worldwide, a company statement said. It will complement the company's primary R&D hub in Tel Aviv, Israel. Housed within the Bengaluru office, the R&D centre is designed to accommodate over 100 engineers initially, with flexibility to scale, the statement said. *—PTI*

RIL Consumer takes Campa Cola to UAE market

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Reliance Consumer Products Ltd, the FMCG arm of Reliance Industries, on Tuesday announced the launch of its soft drink brand Campa Cola in the UAE at the ongoing Gulfood, the world's largest F&B sourcing event. Campa Cola, which has disrupted the Indian beverages industry, is being launched in the UAE with partner Agthia Group, one of the region's leading food & beverage (F&B) companies, according to a joint statement. Reliance Consumer Products Ltd (RCPL) entered into the soft drink market after acquiring Campa Cola in 2022 and later reintroduced it in 2023. Launch of Campa Cola will introduce a new wave of fans across all consumers in the UAE and spark nostalgia amongst Indian expats connecting them to their roots. Gulfood 2025 is being held from 17-21 February. *—PTI*

Tesla starts hiring in India; signals entering EV market

The move follows a meeting between Musk and PM Modi

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

American electric carmaker Tesla has opened recruitments for various roles in India, including business operations analyst and customer support specialist, in what could be a precursor for the company's entry into the country.

As per the job postings on the company's website, the posts are for the 'Mumbai Suburban' area.

These roles include service advisor, parts advisor, service technician, service manager, sales & customer support, store manager, sales & customer support, business operations analyst, customer support supervisor, customer support specialist, delivery operations specialist, order operations specialist, inside sales advisor, and consumer engagement manager.

A mailed query to confirm if the recruitments are part of the company's plans to enter the Indian market and the possible timeline for starting sales in India remained unanswered.

The hiring by Tesla in India comes close after the recent meeting of company founder and American tech billionaire Elon Musk with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the latter's recent US visit.

Elon Musk's proposed visit has raised expectations of Tesla electric cars being introduced in India at the earliest *PHOTO: X*

Tesla's possible entry into the Indian market has been keenly awaited.

Last April, company founder and American tech billionaire Elon Musk had postponed his proposed visit to India at the last minute citing "very heavy Tesla obligations" but the proposed visit had raised expectations of Musk announcing plans for the way forward for selling Tesla electric cars in India at the earliest.

His planned visit to India came weeks after the government announced a new electric vehicle policy under which import duty concessions will be given to companies setting up manufacturing units in the country with a minimum investment of USD 500 million, a move aimed at attracting major global players like Tesla. *—PTI*

INDIA, US AIM FOR $500B TRADE DEAL: GOYAL

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

India and the United States are set to enhance bilateral trade to USD 500 billion and negotiate a robust trade agreement within the next six to eight months, according to Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal.

This announcement follows Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Washington, during which the two nations committed to doubling their two-way commerce by 2030.

The proposed agreement is expected to encompass various sectors, potentially including chapters on goods, services, and investments. However, Goyal highlighted that confirmation from the US side is still pending.

The US was India's largest trading partner from 2021 to 2024, with trade figures for 2023-24 showing an increasing reliance on American markets. *—PTI*

ICRA predicts GDP growth by 6.4% in Q3

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

ICRA has forecasted India's GDP to grow by 6.4 per cent in the December quarter, driven by increased government spending despite inconsistencies in consumer demand. Following a robust growth of 6.7 per cent in April-June, the economy exhibited a decline to 5.4 per cent in the September quarter, attributed to sluggish governmental capital expenditure amid upcoming general elections and weak consumption trends.

ICRA Chief Economist Aditi Nayar highlighted that Q3 FY2025 experienced a significant uplift due to heightened aggregate government expenditure – both central and state – on capital and revenue fronts. Also, a strong growth in services exports, a rebound in merchandise exports, and a healthy output from key kharif crops contributed positively, bolstering rural sentiment.

While certain consumer-centric sectors grew during the festive period, urban consumer sentiment showed signs of decline. Improvements were also noted in sectors such as mining and electricity following previous weather-related challenges. Nayar emphasised that although GDP growth in Q3 FY2025 is expected to outperform the slump recorded in the prior quarter, it may still fall short of the National Statistical Office's (NSO) initial growth estimates for Q1 FY2025.

- ICRA Chief Economist Aditi Nayar highlighted that Q3 FY2025 experienced a significant uplift due to heightened aggregate government expenditure – both central and state – on capital and revenue fronts

The NSO plans to release the October-December growth estimates on 28 February, alongside the second advance estimates for the current fiscal year. The first estimates in January revealed a projected GDP growth rate of 6.4 per cent, marking a four-year low, while the Reserve Bank of India anticipates a growth rate of 6.6 per cent. *—PTI*

India needs resource efficiency: Bhupender Yadav

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav has emphasised the necessity for India to maximise resource efficiency to meet its aspiration of becoming a developed nation by 2047. Speaking at the "Waste Recycling and Climate Change" conclave, he called on industries to design products that promote circularity and adopt advanced recycling technologies to reduce reliance on imports.

Yadav highlighted the need to shift from a linear "take-make-dispose" economy, suggesting a recycling and reuse as alternative models. He projected that India's circular economy could value USD 2 trillion by 2050, potentially creating 10 million jobs.

Additional Secretary Amandeep Garg said the growing challenge of rising resource consumption alongside increasing waste generation. Currently, India recycles only a fraction of its waste, with significant room for growth in the recycling sector, he said. *—PTI*

Mexico awaits Google's response in name dispute

MEXICO CITY, 18 FEB

Mexico is awaiting a response from Google regarding its request to restore the name Gulf of Mexico on Google Maps before pursuing legal action. President Claudia Sheinbaum revealed that the tech giant's vice-president, Cris Turner, informed the Mexican government that Google plans to retain the name Gulf of America, as designated by former US President Donald Trump.

Currently, the Gulf is labelled as the Gulf of America in the United States, the Gulf of Mexico in Mexico, and both names in other regions. Turner stated that Google's policy aims to ensure consistency and impartiality across all mappings, insisting that the company consults authoritative sources for geographical representation.

Mexican officials argue that the name change undermines their sovereignty, highlighting that the US has jurisdiction over approximately 46 per cent of the Gulf while Mexico controls 49 per cent. The name Gulf of Mexico has historical recognition dating back to 1607 and is acknowledged by the United Nations.

Regarding this. Sheinbaum said Mexico would not tolerate the renaming and plans to take legal action if necessary. Simultaneously, high-level meetings focused on trade and security between Mexico and the US are scheduled for this week to foster collaboration amid rising geopolitical tensions. *—PTI*

Mkts end marginally lower amid foreign fund outflows

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended marginally lower on Tuesday as uninterrupted foreign fund outflows and slowdown in corporate earnings continued to hit investors' sentiment.

After a day's breather, the 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex ended 29.47 points or 0.04 per cent lower at 75,967.39. Intra-day, it dropped 465.85 points or 0.61 per cent to 75,531.01.

The NSE Nifty dipped 14.20 points or 0.06 per cent to settle at 22,945.30. From the Sensex pack, IndusInd Bank, Mahindra, UltraTech Cement, Hindustan Unilever, Sun Pharma, Tata Consultancy Services, ITC and Asian Paints were among the biggest laggards.

NTPC, Zomato, Tech Mahindra, Power Grid, Kotak Mahindra Bank and HCL Tech were among the gainers.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 3,937.83 crore on Monday, according to exchange data.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory while Shanghai ended lower.

European markets were quoting mostly lower.

US markets were closed on Monday in observance of 'President's Day'.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.73 per cent to USD 75.77 a barrel.

The Sensex climbed 57.65 points or 0.08 per cent to settle at 75,996.86 on Monday, ending an eight-day losing run. The Nifty rebounded 30.25 points or 0.13 per cent to 22,959.50. *—PTI*

ASIA STOCKS UP AS CHINA'S TECH STOCKS RALLY

HONG KONG,18 FEB

Shares in Asia were mostly up Tuesday, with Chinese technology stocks surging after Chinese President Xi Jinping met with entrepreneurs this week in what is seen as a show of support to the technology industry.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng rose 1.64 per cent to 22,986.88, while the Shanghai Composite added 0.15 per cent to 3,360.95. Japan's Nikkei 225 was up 0.39 per cent to 39,296.11 after Japan's economic growth for the fourth quarter beat forecasts. In other regional markets, Australia's S&P/ASX 200 slipped 0.53 per cent to 8,491.70. while South Korea's Kospi was up 0.43 per cent to 2,621.73.

China's technology stocks rallied on Tuesday. E-commerce firm Alibaba and smartphone maker Xiaomi both saw their stock price surge over 4 per cent. *—PTI*

Zomato unveils AI-powered customer support

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Zomato has introduced Nugget, an AI-powered customer support platform designed to enhance efficiency across its services, including food delivery, quick commerce platform Blinkit, and supply-chain service Hyperpure. CEO Deepinder Goyal announced the launch on X, describing it as a "highly customisable, low-cost, AI-native support system requiring no coding or development team."

Developed over three years by Zomato Labs, Nugget currently handles over 15 million support interactions per month across Zomato's platforms. With its success internally, Zomato is now offering Nugget to other businesses, with 90 per cent of companies that reviewed it signing up, according to the company.

The launch of Nugget follows Zomato's corporate rebranding to Eternal Ltd. The change reflects Blinkit's rapid growth alongside Zomato's core food delivery business. Announced on 6 February, the rebranding will see the company transition its website to eternal.com and change its stock ticker. "Our board has approved this change, and I urge shareholders to support it," Goyal said. *—Agencies*

KEY FEATURES OF NUGGET

- 80% query resolution handled autonomously
- Real-time learning and adaptation to improve responses
- No-code setup, making it accessible to businesses.
- Instant chat and voice support for seamless customer interaction

DTDC launches AI-powered virtual assistant DIVA 2.0

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

DTDC Express, a leading express logistics services provider, has unveiled DIVA 2.0, an innovative conversational GenAI designed to enhance customer support in the domestic logistics sector. This cutting-edge technology is now active on the company's MyDTDC mobile app and website.

DIVA 2.0 is an upgrade from the earlier DIVA 1.0 chatbot,

PHOTO: DTDC.COM

reflecting DTDC's commitment to digital transformation and empowering customers with intuitive tools for an improved shipping experience. *—PTI*

MOVING WITH TIME

Grok-3: xAI's most advanced AI yet

Grok-3, the latest AI chatbot from Elon Musk's xAI, has arrived with groundbreaking advancements. Unveiled in a live-streamed event with 100,000 viewers, Musk claimed it is "an order of magnitude more capable" than its predecessor. Musk also explained the origin of the name Grok, revealing it was inspired by Robert Heinlein's science fiction novel Stranger in a Strange Land. The term "grok," used by a character raised on Mars, means to fully and profoundly understand something.

FUNDING & VALUATIONS:
- xAI raising $10B, could hit $75B valuation.
- OpenAI seeking $40B, aiming for $300B valuation.

GROK-3 VS. THE COMPETITION
- Benchmarks show Grok-3 outperforming:
- Google's Gemini 2 Pro
- DeepSeek V3
- OpenAI's GPT-4o
- Excels in science, coding, and math.

WHAT'S NEW WITH GROK-3?
- 10x More Computing Power than Grok-2.
- Completed pre-training in January and improving daily.

NEW DEEPSEARCH TOOL:
- AI-powered smart search engine.
- Explains how it thinks and processes queries.
- Competes with Perplexity AI's DeepResearch tool.

XAI VS OPENAI: THE AI BATTLE

MUSK'S LEGAL WAR AGAINST OPENAI:
- Filed two lawsuits against OpenAI.
- Offered $97.4 billion to buy OpenAI's nonprofit arm (offer rejected).
- Sam Altman (OpenAI CEO) called it an attempt to slow them down.

GROK-3'S INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES
- Built an AI data center from scratch in 4 months.
- 100,000 GPUs up and running in 122 days, then doubled in 92 days.

BIG TECH INVESTING IN AI INFRASTRUCTURE:
- Dell Technologies: $5B AI server deal with xAI.
- SoftBank, Oracle, MGX (Abu Dhabi): $500B AI investments.

HOW TO ACCESS GROK-3?
- Premium+ subscribers on X (Twitter).
- New SuperGrok subscription on Grok.com & mobile app.

CT starts today amid 50-over debate

Rohit Sharma-led side will 'strongly' miss Jasprit Bumrah, says Shikhar Dhawan

DUBAI/KARACHI, 18 FEB

From a team perspective, India will be eager to wrest their first ICC trophy in the 50-over format after their triumph in the 2013 Champions Trophy under the enigmatic Mahendra Singh Dhoni.

It will be a perfect parting gift to Kohli and Rohit and a welcome carpet to some young names such as Shubman Gill who are set to take India into the future.

Afghanistan, who have transformed into a formidable white-ball outfit, also can put other teams under immense pressure through a squad that has Rashid Khan and Rahmanullah Gurbaz.

Bangladesh now has receded to the periphery of cricketing consciousness, but can they pull off a stunner as they had done in the 2007 50-over World Cup? It applies to Pakistan as well. If they can stop obsessing over the match against India and not treat it as the 'final frontier', then the home side is a dangerous opposition. Their pace attack is top-notch and they have some batters like Fakhar Zaman and Salman Ali Agha who can turn the heat on the rivals.

It would be a fitting tribute to a tournament that has already gone through several disruptions. So, let the play begin..

Former India opener Shikhar Dhawan opines that Rohit Sharma-led side will "very strong" miss the absence of pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah in the ICC Champions Trophy. Bumrah was ruled out of the eight-team spectacle due to a lower back injury. Harshit Rana was named his replacement in India's squad. "It is a great feeling to have the ICC Men's Champions Trophy back. I remember when I played in it for the first time in 2013, and I loved it, and there is already a buzz around this tournament," ICC quoted Dhawan as saying. "There is so much speculation and a lot of predictions, which is fun, and I can't look past India. I am quite confident about them, they have a solid team and played very well against England in their recent ODI series. "My concern is they are going to miss Jasprit Bumrah, there is no doubt he will be a big absence and I think they will feel it very strongly," he added. *—PTI*

Wave from 'King' Kohli, Shreyas' sign on T-shirt

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

In a video that has surfaced on social media, Iyer can be seen signing autographs on t-shirts for multiple fans who were present at the venue. Rehman Zaid and Fatima cricket fans from Oman, who are in Dubai to watch India's matches in the upcoming Champions Trophy 2025, were delighted to see the Indian stars in training and were happy to get Iyer's autograph on a t-shirt.

With little time wasted, they captured the cricketers' pictures and videos on their phones, standing a mere 5 meters away and separated only by a barricade and a few security personnel. "We have come from Oman. We will be watching a few matches of India. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

ICC APPROVES JAMIESON AS A REPLACEMENT

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Kyle Jamieson will replace injured pacer Lockie Ferguson in New Zealand's squad for the Champions Trophy after the ICC Event Technical Committee approved the change on the eve of their campaign opener against Pakistan here on Wednesday.

Thirty-year-old Jamieson, who has played 13 ODIs, was named as a replacement after Ferguson was ruled out due to an injury to his right foot.

This will be Jamieson's first ODI match since playing against Bangladesh in September 2023, and the first international appearance after the first Test against South Africa in February last year. *—PTI*

RETURN OF TOP TEAMS FOR CHAMPIONS TROPHY MEANS A LOT TO PAKISTAN CRICKET: WASIM BARI

BCCI TAKES U-TURN ON FAMILY RULE

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has reportedly reversed its previous decision regarding players traveling with their family members.

According to reports, the board has now permitted Indian cricketers to bring their family members to Dubai during the ICC Champions Trophy.

Following India's heavy defeat in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, BCCI introduced a set of 10 strict guidelines, including restrictions on players traveling with their spouses or family members. However, the board has now relaxed this rule, providing relief to the players.

It is reported that players will be allowed to have their family members accompany them to Dubai but with a condition. *—PTI*

INDIA'S BOWLING COACH MORNE MORKEL HAS LEFT FOR HIS HOME IN SOUTH AFRICA DUE TO A FAMILY EMERGENCY

2032 Olympics to be announced on 25 March

PARIS, 18 FEB

The Queensland government will announce the venue plan for the 2032 Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games next month, ending more than 1,200 days of Games chaos. Brisbane secured the Games in 2021, but ongoing political disputes, especially over the main stadium and athletics venue, have delayed a final plan. After he was elected Queensland Premier last November, David Crisafulli appointed a seven-member board to reassess venue options. According to ABC News, an independent panel reviewing the Games infrastructure will submit its report to the state government on 8 March, offering recommendations on whether a new stadium should be constructed and the location for the athletics events. Earlier this month, the Australian Olympic Committee CEO Carroll stressed the need to decide on the main venues for the 2032 Olympics before the end of June.*—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

I have not quit IOC panel, will complete term: Mary Kom

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Indian Olympic Association's athletes commission chairperson and boxing legend M C Mary Kom on Tuesday denied reports that she has resigned from her position, insisting that she has been misunderstood and will complete her tenure in the panel.The 42-year-old Manipuri, who is also a 2012 Olympics bronze-winner, had travelled to Haldwani for the National Games closing ceremony last week where she expressed her displeasure over being lodged at an "inferior hotel".Speaking to PTI, Mary Kom said her outburst has been misconstrued as resignation."I have not resigned, I will complete my tenure (which ends in 2026)," she asserted."I was merely telling my fellow (athletes commission) members that if this kind of treatment happens again, I will consider resigning. *—PTI*

Late goals give Genoa 2-0 win over Venezia

DUBAI, 18 FEB

Venezia's winless run ticked up to eight games on Monday after the team conceded two goals in the last eight minutes to lose 2-0 to Genoa in Serie A. Venezia's last win came against Cagliari on Dec. 22 and it remains in 19th place, two points above last-place Monza and four behind Parma. The home side came close through Nicolussi Caviglia and Kike Perez in the first half but Genoa was on top in the second period, with Venezia keeper Ionut Radu pulling off excellent saves to deny Aaron Martin and Andrea Pinamonti.*—PTI*

Real Kashmir moves up the ladder

SRINAGAR, 18 FEB

Real Kashmir FC scored a home win as they beat Namdhari FC 1-0 after an early strike by Paulo Cézar in their I-League match here on Tuesday. With five victories in the last seven games, the Snow Leopards have recovered from their poor form in the mid-season and re-announced themselves in the 2024-25 title race. Brazilian striker Paulo Cézar scored the only goal of the game from the penalty spot in the seventh minute.Real Kashmir, who are the only side yet to lose at home this season (six wins and three draws), have overtaken Namdhari for second spot with 26 points in 15 matches.On the other hand, the Punjab side is in a slump, winning just one of the last five games which has seriously dented their title.*—PTI*

WOMEN'S PREMIER LEAGUE

Delhi Capitals, UP Warriorz eye improved batting effort

VADODARA, 18 FEB

Delhi Capitals and UP Warriorz will be aiming for an improved batting effort here on Wednesday after floundering in their previous Women's Premier League matches.

Their clash is also the last match here at the Kotambi Stadium before the WPL action shifts to Bengaluru from February 21.

The Capitals are yet to match the pre-tournament favorite billing with performances. Their batting has failed to fire in two matches, even in their victory over the Mumbai Indians.

They made heavy weather of the chase of a 165-run target before winning by two wickets and folded for 141 against the Royal Challengers Bengaluru on Monday during the eight-wicket defeat.

The trouble starts from the top as skipper Meg Lanning has not been able to produce a big knock yet. It seems that international retirement has taken a toll on Australians.

There have been occasional fireworks by Shafali Varma, Jemimah Rodrigues, or Sarah Bryce, but they have not been able to convert into a substantial inning.

Their bowling has been in much better shape with veteran Shikha Pandey leading from the front, but she needs some more support from others, particularly from fellow pacer Arundhati Reddy. Match starts at 7.30 pm. *—PTI*

FIH Pro League: India loses 3-4 to Spain

BHUBANESWAR, 18 FEB

The Indian women's team suffered a 3-4 defeat at the hands of Spain in their thrilling FIH Pro League match here on Tuesday.

India had taken the lead in the second quarter through Baljeeet Kaur (19th minute) and Spain equalised just a couple of minutes later through Sofia Rogoski (21st minute). Spain then took the lead as well in the same quarter with a strike by Estel Petchame (25th minute).

Sakshi Rana found the equaliser for India in the third quarter with her 38th-minute goal and Rutaja Dadaso Pisal (45th minute) placed the home team ahead when she found the back of the net at the end of the third quarter.

However, Spain staged a remarkable comeback as they scored twice in the fourth and final quarter with goals from Estel (49th minute) and Lucia Jimenez (52nd minute). at the Kalinga Stadium.

While India failed to score in the final quarter, the visitors converted two penalty corners. There was a bit of drama in the end and both teams had lost their reviews.

Baljeeet's goal was her first at the senior level. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

F1 drivers gather in London to launch 75th anniversary

LONDON, 18 FEB

All 20 Formula 1 drivers and the 10 teams are expected in London on Tuesday to kick-start the 2025 season with a new live launch show.

The F1 75 Live event at London's O2 arena marks a new approach by the series. It's the first time the sport is hosting its large-scale launch event, rather than leaving it to the individual teams to present their drivers and cars.

The televised two-hour show includes musical acts like country singer Kane Brown, British band Take That and MGK, also known as Machine Gun Kelly.

F1's preparations for the new season — which marks the series' 75th anniversary — continue with preseason testing next week at the Bahrain International Circuit. The first race is the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on 16 March. *—PTI*

La Liga: Barcelona edge Vallecano 1-0

DOHA, 18 FEB

Robert Lewandowski's first-half penalty earned Barcelona a hard-fought 1-0 win over Rayo Vallecano to move back to the summit of the La Liga standings.

After draws for fellow title hopefuls Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid at the weekend, Hansi Flick's side took advantage to keep their hopes of a 28th league crown alive.

Barcelona started strongly in the contest, with Lewandowski unable to guide an early header on target after good work from Raphinha on the edge of the box. Andrei Ratiu then almost presented the hosts with the opener after a poor header back to his goalkeeper, but Raphinha dragged his effort wide of Augusto Batalla's goal.

But Barcelona's dominance eventually prevailed in the 28th minute when Pathe Ciss's unnecessary foul on Inigo Martinez from a corner saw the referee point to the spot.

Lewandowski stepped up and sent Batalla the wrong way to open the scoring and net his 20th La Liga goal of the season. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Manu Bhaker with coach Jaspal Rana
PHOTO: PTI

Jaspal Rana will continue as my coach: Manu Bhaker

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Eyeing glory in the next World Championship, double Olympic medallist shooter Manu Bhaker said Jaspal Rana will continue to be her "coach" despite the Dronacharya awardee being roped in as the High-Performance trainer for pistol discipline by the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI).

Rana, a four-time Asian Games gold medallist, had a very bitter and public fallout with Manu before the Tokyo Olympics but they reconciled before last year's Paris Games, where the latter made history by bagging two bronze medals."Honestly, I only have to say one thing he (Rana) is my coach all I know and he is very good at what he does.

He is very, very talented and he has been a great coach for me."All I know and all I can say is that he is my coach.

Of course, he can be anyone else's coach as well but for me, he is my coach," Manu said after winning the BBC Sportswomen of the Year 2024 award at a glittering function here on Monday night.

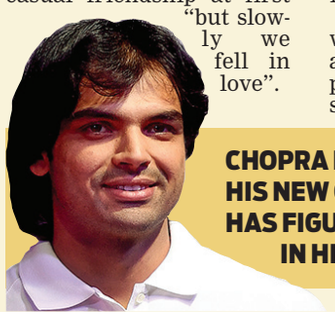
Under Rana's guidance, Manu, who was struggling after the Tokyo Games, made a remarkable comeback and became the first Indian to win two medals in a single edition of the Olympics since Independence. *—PTI*

Jan's tweaks will take me to 90m mark soon: Neeraj

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Two-time Olympic medal-winning javelin throw star Neeraj Chopra has revealed that his new coach Jan Zelezny has figured out mistakes in his technique and will now make some adjustments to his throwing routine to achieve the 90m mark that the Indian star is pursuing for a while.

The 26-year-old, while speaking to India Today, also opened up about his hush-hush wedding to former tennis player Himani Mor last month, saying that their relationship was a casual friendship at first "but slowly we fell in love".



CHOPRA HAS REVEALED THAT HIS NEW COACH JAN ZELEZNY HAS FIGURED OUT MISTAKES IN HIS TECHNIQUE

Chopra has been trying hard to hit the 90m mark. His personal best stands at 89.94m which was achieved in 2022.

His season begins in May with the Diamond League and would mark the competitive start of his partnership with Zelezny, a former Olympic and world champion who also holds the world record (98.48m).

"I believe a 90+ throw is happening soon. He (Jan Zelezny) has made some technical adjustments in my game," said Chopra.

"He (Zelezny) feels that his tweaks would help me. I've been able to understand what he expects from me.

One of the mistakes that he told me about was how I was throwing very low even in Paris and that I was leaning toward the left. *—PTI*

FLAGS FAVORITISM

No consistency: Djokovic flays anti-doping agencies

DOHA, 18 FEB

Novak Djokovic says a majority of tennis players have lost faith in the anti-doping authorities following Jannik Sinner's three-month ban, and there's a widespread feeling that "favoritism" is being shown to the sport's biggest stars.

The 24-time major winner called on the World Anti-Doping Agency and the International Tennis Integrity Agency to overhaul their processes for dealing with doping cases "because the system and the structure doesn't work."

"Right now there is a lack of trust generally from the tennis players, both male and female, toward WADA and ITIA and the whole process," Djokovic said at the Qatar Open.

Top-ranked Sinner reached a deal with WADA on Saturday to accept a ban that will have him back playing in time for the French Open in May without having to miss a single Grand Slam tournament. That came after the International Tennis Integrity Agency had decided not to suspend Sinner for what it judged was accidental contamination by a banned anabolic steroid last March.

The short ban for Sinner came after five-time Grand Slam champion Iga Swiatek accepted a one-month suspension in November after testing positive for a banned substance that she said was accidentally consumed because of a contaminated nonprescription medication. *—PTI*

Rybakina, Badosa progress to round of 16

Rybakina and Paula Badosa, two of the top seeds at the Dubai Open, advanced on Tuesday and will face off in the round of 16 at the hard-court tournament.No. 6-seeded Rybakina beat Moyuka Uchijima of Japan 6-3, 6-2. Spain's Badosa, the No. 9 seed, topped Belgium's Elise Mertens 6-2, 6-1 before rain started to fall.

Alcaraz beats Cilic in straight sets at Qatar Open

DOHA, 18 FEB

Top-seeded Carlos Alcaraz overcame Croatian veteran Marin Cilic 6-4, 6-4 Monday to reach the round of 16 at the Qatar Open.

The 36-year-old Cilic, the 2014 U.S. Open champion who has fallen to No. 192 in the rankings, was playing his first match of the season after recovering from a long-term knee injury. The Croatian led 4-3 and 0-40 on Alcaraz's serve in the second set, but the Spanish four-time major winner managed to recover and then broke in the next game.

"I am just really happy that I stayed calm at that moment, breathing, going through my routines, making good points," Alcaraz said. "That's why I was able to win in two sets."

Alcaraz will play either Zhang Zhizhen of China or Italy's Luca Nardi next.

Earlier, seventh-seeded Grigor Dimitrov lost 6-4, 6-4 to Jiri Lehecka. *—PTI*